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THE SQUADROON

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

TRAVELS WITHOUT BAEDEKER

THE BODLEY HEAD

THE SQUADROON

BY ARDERN BEAMAN

107759

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TO

POLLY

AND

GOLIATH

FOREWORD

LONG, long ago, in the good old days before the Country and the Service had gone to the dogs, Uncle John commanded a Regiment of Heavy Dragoons. He has just written to me. "How is it," he asks, "that we can hear nothing of the doings of the Cavalry? When they've been engaged in some of the biggest battles in history those two young rascals of mine write and say, 'We fairly put it across the Hun,' or 'The Hun airly put it across us.'" That is their graphic way of describing a great victory or a crushing defeat! And I can get no further details out of them whatever—and all the others I know are equally reticent. You've always set up to be a bit of a scribe. Of course your delivery is damnable—but there's sometimes some good sense in your sermons, and, whatever the rest of the family may say, I've always believed with your poor mother that you write them yourself. Now you've been with a Cavalry Brigade through the most stirring time of the war, why don't you write an account of their life out there—a plain unvarnished tale for the old fogies like myself who could not go out, and even more for the youngsters who follow after, so that, in years to come, they may know what manner of life their predecessors led in those great days?"

So wrote Uncle John. But, unlike the soldiers of Wellington, I have one supreme quality. I know when I am beaten. I know that I am totally unequal to the task that he proposes.

And yet the idea fascinates me. Cavalry! What memories that word awakens! I hear again the jingling spurs, the champing bits, the clatter of the long columns on the cobbled roads. Dream pictures of horse and horsemen, battles, bivouacs and billets rise up and thrill me through and through—me, the broken-down crock of a Padre who will never ride again, buried in the heart of a festering slum.

All right, Uncle John, I will try. One never knows what one can do till one tries. And, if the result is only a travesty of that wonderful fellowship which I shall lovingly try to paint with the pale medium of words, then the blame and the shame be upon your head.

Cavalry have had many ups and downs in the public favour. During the days of the retreat from Mons, they carried out their proper rôle with the spirit and thoroughness that was to be expected of regular troops so highly trained and with such high traditions. During the winter of 1914, when a single line of battered heroes was all that stood between our homes and the hosts of Germany, the Cavalry, dismounted, played in that thin, unconquerable line a very valiant part. After long periods, sometimes of weeks, in the trenches, they expected no reliefs, because they knew that there was no one to relieve them. When heavily attacked they looked for no supports, because they knew that there was no one to support them. Almost daily as a desperate resort to deceive the enemy, who, with his boundless superiority

of numbers, might so easily have surged over them and onward to the sea, those old contemptibles went out instead and vigorously attacked him. And England was saved. In the early battles of 1915, before our new Armies had begun to take the field, and while the state of affairs was yet most grave, the Cavalry again fought on their feet, adding still further to the honours which they had before so staunchly won.

Then there came a change. The warfare of movement was over; the trench lines took on a permanent character. Over the whole face of Flanders and of Northern France deep obstacles were dug, and in front of these obstacles sprang up the still more formidable crops of wide, impassable wire. It seemed to the many that in France the days of Cavalry were ended. But the Higher Command firmly held the hope that, with careful preparation, a breach might be made in the enemy's front system, and that masses of Cavalry might be poured through to seize strategical points beyond. During the following two years seventeen such "gap schemes" were projected, but all were unsuccessful, either because on zero day the necessary gap was not made, or, if the gap was made, the enemy was not enough thrown into confusion to allow of the Cavalry passing through. Gradually the Cavalry began to lose faith. They began to believe that their day would never come. The more enterprising spirits tried to go away to the Infantry, to the Machine Gun Corps, to the Tanks. Others, more ambitious and less enterprising, tried to go to the Staff. But the Higher Command, in spite of all discouragement, was still calm and firm in its original opinion, and allowed only a very few to go.

This was a humiliating period for the Cavalry.

Politicians delivered slighting speeches about them in Parliament. Eminent writers held them up to ridicule and obloquy in the press. During this time the Cavalry, when not sedulously training for the next gap scheme, or when not actually employed upon a gap scheme, were taking their turn in the trenches, or were furnishing large working and digging parties in the line to relieve the Infantry of those arduous and hateful duties. But towards the end of 1917, when the conscripts had begun to appear in France, a horse soldier could hardly pass an Infantry detachment on the road without being greeted by ironical cheers and bitter abuse.

Then came the Cambrai offensive of November 20th. This was a revolution in trench warfare. Secret, swift and sudden our blow was struck. The Tanks and the Infantry achieved a brilliant success. The Cavalry failed to pass through and were withdrawn to Fins. A few days later came the crushing German counter-stroke. Our forces, elated by their splendid victory, had pushed forward into a salient, a dangerous salient which they were far too weak to hold. They were thrown back; in places fighting with magnificent stubbornness, in places not fighting at all. The situation was grave in the extreme. Where the fight was fiercest, where the issue was most critical, where the enemy was coming on with no opposition, there the squadrons of cavalry were galloped up, through the confusion, and flung into the battle line. And, as in 1914, the tide was again stemmed.

A few months later, on March 21st, the Germans launched their mighty offensive. The right of the British Army reeled, and foundered beneath the on-

rushing wave; and there followed the most dark and melancholy episode in the whole story of the war.

When the storm broke our Cavalry were on the extreme right of the line, facing St. Quentin. For two days and nights those trained, tried soldiers fought a steady, dogged rearguard action. Then, by a fine piece of organization, amid all the tumult and confusion of disaster, the led-horses were brought to Pontoise, the men were withdrawn thither from the line, and what remained of the Cavalry was once more a mobile mounted force.

The fate of Paris now hung in the balance. The reserves of Foch were in motion; the British Fifth Army had almost ceased to exist. It was imperative to check the German advance until the upcoming French Corps should have time to deploy and to form their order of battle.

From Pontoise a long column of Cavalry set out for Noyon. They reached it at midnight, and found it in flames, occupied by the Germans. Before dawn they rode forward to deny to the enemy the heights of Porcquericourt. All that day a bitter battle raged around the Bois des Essarts, and for the first time since the beginning of his offensive the enemy, in that quarter, made no progress. When night fell, those dismounted horsemen, worn by five days of continuous fighting, perished by the biting cold, dug themselves in upon the line which they had held at the close of day. At four in the morning a Division of the great French "Iron Corps" relieved them in their line, and the road to Paris was barred.

Before dawn the column—not so long a column now—was on the march again, towards Montdidier. Ragged, sleepless, with red-eyed, bearded, haggard

faces, the famished, worn-out men spurred on their famished, worn-out horses. Montdidier was found to be already in the keeping of the French, so there followed a merciful night of food and sleep for man and beast. During the night news came that Amiens was in imminent danger. Early next morning the column was on the road again, hastening northward. All day they marched, and not till long after midnight did they arrive in the neighbourhood of Cottenchy. Scarcely had they off-saddled and picketed down, before "Boot and saddle" sounded. The situation was indeed desperate. The enemy had reached the ridge above Moreuil, not more than five miles distant from Amiens itself. The Paris-Amiens railway was almost in their grasp.

Our Cavalry moved rapidly across the Luce river, galloped up the eastern slopes, swept back the enemy from the extremities of the ridge, and proceeded to counter-attack the Bois de Moreuil. One squadron instantly tried to charge through the wood; others dismounted and advanced through the thick undergrowth on foot. At sunset, after a stern battle of varying fortune, the wood was ours. Infantry came up and took over the line, and the Cavalry withdrew into support to the valley below. Next day the enemy made a sudden and determined attack. Our line broke. The Germans carried the wood and began to advance down the slopes towards Amiens. Again the Cavalry came up at a gallop and flung themselves into action. Where they came into action, there they remained for two and a half days. Our wreckage drifted through them, dull-eyed, vacant, apathetic, moving without haste and without fear, indifferent alike to life and death, irresistibly carried along by the

receding tide. Alone the handful of Cavalry held its ground, beating off attack after attack. And when its line had become so thin that it could no longer hope to sustain another attack, repeating the tactics of 1914, it went forward itself and attacked the enemy, driving him headlong out of Hangard Wood.

Early on the morning of April 2nd, the blue-grey uniforms of France came surging up the slopes, and Amiens was saved. Not only Amiens, but Abbeville and the British Army.

All that passed long ago. But since those dark days of March I have observed that the horse soldier can ride where he pleases without fear of insults and derision.

The purpose of this narrative, however, is not unduly to extol the occasional performances of the Cavalry, nor to excuse their many failures and their long periods of seeming inutility. It aims only to paint in plain and faithful colours the life and sentiments of that small body of young officers and of other ranks which goes to make up a Squadron of Cavalry in the field.

If any there are, elderly persons, and senior officers of the old school, to whom the ideas, opinions and language of these modern young soldiers may appear unseemly, or even outrageous, I would have them to remember the old platitude that it is by their deeds, not by their words, that all men must be judged.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	JOINING THE SQUADROON	1
II.	MY COMPANIONS	18
III.	BILLETS	30
IV.	RUMOURS	59
V.	DAY MARCHING	77
VI.	THE GAP	108
VII.	CAMBRAI	116
VIII.	ARMBENS	126
IX.	THE TRENCH PARTY	136
X.	THE DEVASTATED AREA	175
XI.	MARCH	189
XII.	APRIL	216
XIII.	RECONSTRUCTION	231
XIV.	THE GREAT ADVANCE	249
XV.	THE TRAVELLING CIRCUS	276
XVI.	THE LAST LAP	287
XVII.	THE GREAT RASPBERRY	296
XVIII.	APRÈS LA GUERRE FINIT	300
XIX.	L'ENVOI	304

THE SQUADROON

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CHAPTER I

JOINING THE SQUADROON

ONE September evening of 1917, after a series of wonderful vicissitudes and adventures—about which I tried to tell you at some length, but which Mr. Lane has insisted on my cutting out—I completed the journey from Waterloo Station, via Havre, Rouen and Frevent, to the Headquarters of our Cavalry Brigade.

On reporting my arrival I was received with much courtesy and kindness by the only Staff Officer who at the moment was in the office. My request to be allowed to live with a certain Squadron of a Regiment to which I was strongly attached by personal ties was readily granted; and half an hour later I set out for that mess which, during the next momentous year and a half, was to be my moving and happy home.

At the time of my arrival, the Headquarters of the Regiment were billeted in a handsome château standing far back from the road in the dignified seclusion of its own flowery gardens, wide lawns and deeply wooded park. The Echelons were billeted in the one-streeted village of the valley below; and two other

straggling villages in the neighbourhood contained the three Squadrons. So difficult is it to find stabling and shelter for horses that a cavalry regiment in rest billets is of necessity widely scattered; and at this time the whole area of the regimental command was enclosed within a circumference of not less than four miles.

I paid my respects to the Colonel, his Second-in-Command, his Adjutant and his Intelligence Officer, which little community made up the mess of R.H.Q.; that is to say the person and the court of the most absolute despotism that still exists within any liberal constitution. It says much for the strong sense and the native justice of the average not very enlightened public school Briton, that the powers of the regimental command—boundless powers for good and evil, for happiness and misery, for reward and punishment, for favouritism and vindictiveness—are so seldom abused.

In a spacious panelled room of no great age and of strangely mingled refinement and crudity, hung with the portraits of some ancestors and ornamented with carvings of game and fruit, I was regaled at tea with such a profusion of farm delicacies as would have excited the envy of the rationed tea-loving folk at home. Sugar, milk, cream, fresh butter, jam, honey and cake were bountifully displayed upon the long oak table.

The owner of the château, a middle-aged man of ancient and noble lineage, was away at the war. His mother and wife, however, with two small sons and their governess, were in residence. As is common in rural France, this aristocratic family of most polished manners, cultivated minds and distinguished persons,

sat, ate and for the most part lived in their kitchen. In a second kitchen leading out from that in which the family had their being, two long tables were spread three times daily for the domestic servants and for about twenty retainers who laboured on the château grounds.

In our endless wanderings over Northern France, we visited many châteaux. Almost all were modern, because, we were told, the mediæval country places of the old nobility had been destroyed in the maniac frenzy of the revolutionary wars. And, wherever we found the family in occupation of its château, it was always leading a life of unpretentious simplicity. Nor was this simplicity the outcome of want, for those frugal French landowners are always well to do, and often even opulent. Terrible memories of the Revolution seem to have stamped out for ever in that land idle luxuriousness and wanton ostentation of wealth; which are indeed so unnecessary to the common weal that, in spite of the absence of these things, it would be hard to imagine a more happy, prosperous and patriotic people than the rural population of Northern France.

Sadly realizing that the time had come when I could with decency eat no more of the good things so temptingly laid out before me, I took leave of my kind hosts, and, accompanied by my kit on a half limber, set out on foot for the Headquarters of C Squadron. When the Regiment had arrived in that area, the C Squadron billeting officer had had the good luck to win the toss for choice of billets and had taken the one-squadron village. Squadrons always much prefer a village to themselves than to sharing a larger village or town with other Squadrons or with other units.

A walk of about two miles brought me to a pleasant agricultural village clustering about the banks of the Canche, and surrounded by orchards and vegetable gardens. On the right-hand side of the main street, within freshly painted iron railings of vivid green, stood a red brick house, taller and more important than any other in the village. Over the arch of its iron gateway fluttered a green and white flag.

"That's the mess, sir," said the limber driver, preparing to get down and unload my kit.

I walked up the little flagged path to the door of the house, feeling very ill at ease. Entering for the first time a crowd of strangers is, to the sensitive, always a highly trying experience; and, if these strangers are very young, the experience is all the more trying: for youth is the severest and most intolerant of critics; nor are its standards always reasonable or humane. I walked into the inevitable kitchen, where the mess cook was preparing dinner, while two more mess servants washed plates, peeled potatoes, cleaned glasses and generally busied themselves about the coming meal, at the same time chatting in fragmentary pidgin-French to a silver-haired, harsh-visaged old dame and a middle-aged woman of less harsh but not more pleasing aspect.

"The mess, sir? In there!" said one of the men, indicating with a half-peeled potato impaled upon a fork the door on his right. I walked in and introduced myself. Six or seven young officers were disposed about the room. One sat in front of the fire reading; another was writing letters; another who was thin and extraordinarily long, and wore pince-nez, was playing patience, humming a little soft crooning accompaniment to his game; two others were having

a spirited argument in a corner of the room. Another, thickset, with shaggy head, nobbly forehead, large rugged features, and protruding lower jaw, from which a massive pipe seemed quite naturally to grow, appeared, in a very loud voice, to be laying down the law. As soon as they became aware of my presence, each stopped his immediate employment to stare at me. I stood for some moments in embarrassed silence under what I morbidly felt was a suspicious and hostile scrutiny. Then a rather bald, rather short young officer of bright rosy complexion, dark lustrous eyes and strong regular features, who seemed to be doing accounts, carefully gathered up a number of currency notes, methodically arranged them in bundles, put them along with his account books into a despatch-box, locked the box, put the key in his pocket, got up and gravely shook my hand.

"Hullo, Padre!" he said. "We've been expecting you. The Skipper's out—won't be back till dinner. I'm Lucas."

He then introduced me all around, and took me over to the billet which he had already been kind enough to fix up for me.

This was my introduction to the Squadron, or I should say "Squadroon," as at this time, for some reason of unknown origin, we pronounced all words ending in "on" as "oon."

With the exception, perhaps, of a Battery, no unit is so isolated and so independent as a Squadron of Cavalry. It is the fighting unit of Cavalry. It is the largest body of men and horses that comes under the direct and personal command of a single officer. In billets it is usually in sole possession of a village; in the field its success or failure depend entirely on the

skill and understanding of its own Leader. The normal composition is a Major or a Captain in command—always Majors in the peaceful security of reserve regiments at home, usually Captains in the searching reality of the field—a Captain or Subaltern as Second-in-Command, four Troop Leaders; a Squadron Sergeant-Major; a Squadron Quarter-master Sergeant; and a hundred and fifty rank and file. Actually in France there are three or four supernumerary officers, and a considerable deficiency in the number of the rank and file.

The Squadron Leader is responsible for the training of his command in all the various branches of the art of war, for the maintenance of discipline, for the welfare, recreation and happiness of his men, and for the care and condition of his horses. It is further his province to diffuse a lofty spirit of esprit de corps through all ranks of his command, and to inspire, by his own personal example, an enthusiastic devotion to the manly and military virtues.

The well-being, the happiness and often the lives of a hundred and fifty of his fellow men depend upon his lightest word. In his own mess he is supreme. If he be a man of strong character, his power is immense. The minds of young impressionable officers are deeply influenced by his personality. If he sets a tone of negligence, licentiousness and ribaldry, that will be the tone of his whole mess. If he sets an example of cheerful, manly conscientiousness, his subalterns will be cheerful, manly and conscientious. And the spirit that animates the officers is the spirit by which all the other ranks of the Squadron also are animated.

Again, if the Squadron Leader is a man of high

ideals, deep understanding, large conceptions and sensible of his huge human responsibility, he has an illimitable field upon which to expend the talent of silver that has been loaned into his charge.

The Squadron Second-in-Command holds the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer and chief of the "Q" department. He controls the public and the private monies, pays out the Squadron, keeps up the Acquittance rolls, administers the Canteen, and runs the officers' mess. He submits innumerable indents for every imaginable article of human and inhuman use, from boots to bombs, he visits daily the cook-house, billets and sanitary arrangements of each Troop; and, when in action, to his extreme disgust, he remains behind in command of the led horses. In these multifarious duties he is ably assisted by the S.Q.M.S.

Each of the four Troops is led by a Lieutenant or Second Lieutenant, who may have the help of a supernumerary officer. He has a Troop Sergeant as his right-hand man and strong supporter in all matters of training, routine and discipline, and a Second Sergeant who is charged with the endless activities of the Troop "Q" Department. The Second Sergeant finds out all deficiencies of clothing and necessaries and equipment, submits indents accordingly to the S.Q.M.S.; is answerable for the sanitary arrangements of his Troop, and the cleanliness of their billets, is deeply concerned in the drawing and issue of rations; and, in the Troop feed store, he reigns supreme.

The Troop, which, on paper, consists of about thirty other ranks, is divided into four Sections. Each Section is under the command of its own Section Leader, a Corporal or Lance-Corporal. One of these,

the Hotchkiss Gun Section, is of paramount importance, since the fire power of that harsh-working, delicate and capricious weapon is, in theory, equal to the fire power of forty men.

As, in rest, the gun team have double the hours of training, double the amount of equipment to clean, and have in action double the weight to carry, double the hours on duty and more than double the casualties of the rest of the Troop, and as they receive no extra pay or no official compensation of any kind whatever for their additional labours, the Troop Leader always gives them such small privileges as lie in his power; extra pass, for instance, and the best billet in his Troop area.

In addition to the Hotchkiss Gun pack, the Troop has a pack to carry entrenching tools and cooking utensils, a pack of reserve ammunition, and possibly a food or an explosive pack.

These packs are usually carried by sturdy little Welsh ponies, which sometimes acquire almost the domesticity of a dog. They are often allowed to roam around at large, they frequent the cook-houses, devour the savoury remnants of the men's dinner, attend cricket and football matches, and are generally a great source of amusement to all and tremendous favourites in the Troop.

Such is the command of a Troop Leader. Owing to its mobility it is, when skilfully handled, a compact, flexible little striking force of great power. Over this command he exercises the same function and inspires the same spirit as does his Squadron Leader over the whole Squadron.

In every walk of life we find that the lower is a man's position, the harder is his work and the less is

his pay. Similarly, in the Cavalry, no officer has more arduous duties than those of its most junior commander, the Troop Leader.

In billets, he is up with the sun to take his horses to exercise, to put his Troop through some tactical scheme, or to take his N.C.O.'s out for special instruction. The rest of the morning is fully occupied with stables, and with inspections of clothing, rifles, iron rations, washing, saddlery, gaspirators and equipment. After lunch there is a tactical or musketry parade, or, if possible, an inter-troop game of some sort. That is followed by evening stables. If it happens to be his tour of orderly officer he visits all the stables of the Squadron at "night feeds," that is to say at about eight o'clock. And again after half-past nine at night he goes around every horse in the Squadron to see that the line guards are alert, that the horses are properly rugged up and that none of them are loose or in a position to kick one another.

In the line his duties are the same as those of a Platoon Commander in the Infantry. During a whole tour of five days in the front-line trench, he is lucky if he gets five hours' sleep. During his tours in the support and reserve line, what time he is supposed to be laying up a store of rest to sustain him through the strain of his next tour in the front line, he is lucky if he does not spend the greater part of every night on working parties, and of every day on fatigue duties.

But his chief difficulties lie in the fact that he is the point of contact between the two sharply separated classes into which our Army is divided; between the class of officers and the class of men. Great High Commanders dictate orders, lesser commanders and staff officers transmit them by wire, despatch rider and

runner, till they eventually reach the subaltern, who invariably has the unenviable task of putting these orders, through his own personality, into execution. Any fool, sitting in the warmth of his Headquarters after a good dinner and a bottle of generous wine, can take up his pencil and write, "Please detail working party of 50 men with proportion of N.C.O.'s to meet R.E. guide at L5b37 at 2230 2/3 January."

Several hours after the writing of this *billet doux*, a sodden, mud-splashed runner at last finds Priel support trench. He raises his blanket that serves as door to the "baby elephant" in which the officers are sleeping. A bitter gust of sleet drives in behind him, waking most of the occupants. By the time he has trodden on several hands and faces, all are awake and grimly expecting the worst. The Skipper switches on his torch.

"What the hell's 2230?" he growls.

They work it out.

"Humph! 10.30! It's ten to twelve now! Who's turn for working party?"

"Mine," says a slight, fair-haired boy.

The Skipper looks at the tired, old, child-face with a pang of pity. "Right-ho, Jimmie, just come here a minute." They get out the map and discuss what N.C.O's and men are to go while the other officers settle down in their blankets on the muddy floor and try to sleep again.

The details of the party having been settled, the Skipper says:

"Well, bye-bye, old boy! Afraid you'll have a pretty blinking time. Tell the Sergeant-Major to fix up some soup for the lads, and give me a shout when you get back. Cheerioh!"

Then comes the hardest job in all an officer's

province. At midnight, on a bitter winter's night of driving sleet, he has to get woken up, and turned out in full equipment, fifty dog-weary men. He has to lead them in the slushy darkness through a maze of pitfalls and dangerous obstacles to some not very clearly defined point. And, if the guide is still waiting there, after another painful march, he has to keep them working for four hours or more at what is to the soldier the most hateful of all duties.

The ignorant may think that an officer has only to say unto his men "Go!" and they goeth, or "Come!" and they cometh. But actually the soldier has been for so long nursed and led by the hand, that he is in most cases quite incapable of carrying out the simplest order without careful supervision. If an average Lance-Corporal is told to be at a certain cross-roads five miles away from his billet at a certain hour, the chances are considerably against his arriving there at all, and overwhelmingly against his being there up to the appointed time. If a football team of soldiers are about to play a match, no matter how important, and if the team is not under the management of an officer, there will be a delay of anything from a quarter to three quarters of an hour after the agreed time of kicking off before all the members of that team are present on the field.

These are the elements with which Troop Leaders have to deal, night and day, month in, month out, through all the changing conditions of war, personally and at first hand.

If ever a class deserved well of its country, it is the least paid, least decorated, least considered, most killed class of fighting subalterns.

Such then was the composition of the Squadroon.

We were a little world of our own. We had our own domestic policy, our own foreign policy, and our own very definite opinions on all external matters of contemporary interest; and at the same time we kept very much to ourselves. In the name of the Regiment we had a deep though silent pride; nevertheless, under a superficial courtesy, we regarded other Squadrons with grave distrust. There had been little matters of missing horses and missing saddlery—never quite satisfactorily explained. The allocation of doubtful claims too, when Squadrons had been billeted in the same village, was a constant source of soreness. So we liked best to live in isolation under our own Monroe doctrine. The Squadroon was in every sense our home and our world. Far away in a big château lived the Colonel. He loomed austerely large on our horizon as the dispenser of raspberries and plums in a fairly equal proportion. But his occasional visits were not welcome because there was always the disturbing uncertainty as to which might be the particular fruit of the day. Still further away in a still larger château lived the Brigadier. Even still further away in an even still larger château lived the divisional General. And, we believed, somewhere in the nebulously distant land behind the sunset, in a château of fabulous and unimaginable immensity, which none of us would ever see until we went to heaven, lived the Corps Commander.

Our relations with our Generals were, on the whole, of a pleasant nature. If, on our way back off leave, we hit upon one of their châteaux, and if, at about lunch-time we happened, quite by chance, to walk past the window with a preoccupied air, the odds were that a Staff Officer would come out and cheerily bid us to the board.

"What's that boy's name?" the General would ask in an inaudible undertone.

"Smith, sir, Twelfth. Hussars," answers a Staff Officer.

And as we came somewhat shyly forward, the General would greet us genially by name, thereby setting us at once at our ease, and filling us with a glow of pride to think that, after not having seen us for so many months, he should still remember our very name. We feel sure we must indeed have made an impression at that last meeting, and we pull up our chair with a new confidence in ourselves.

And as we are plying a busy knife and fork, we may notice, with a kind of incredulous surprise, that some of the Staff Officers, who keep receiving messages, writing replies and getting up to go out and answer telephone calls, wear a drawn and weary look as though they really had been doing some work. Afterwards the General would ask us a few conversational questions about the state of England and the condition of the horses; and where we were billeted. When we gave the answer to the last, he would say:

"Yes, yes, La Vacquerie, of course, yes! Slipped my memory for the moment!"

And then the chances were that he would send us on our way rejoicing, in a car.

Even on the rare occasions when they invaded our isolated fastness, and showed a penetrating and embarrassing curiosity in the smallest details of our economy, they were invariably genial, and unfailingly kind to the young officer and the soldier.

This kindness probably springs from joyful memories of the days—now seen, as the past always is, through a rose-coloured medium—when they

themselves were careless, light-hearted subalterns; and from the thought of how different was the lot of a subaltern in those gay, irresponsible, days from what it is now in this grim and deadly war. Perhaps, too, they feel a sort of sub-conscious gratitude to the fighting animals upon which their own exalted position is so securely founded.

In action these Superior Beings were of necessity unseen, and were then only associated in the common mind with the failure of rations to appear. But at other times all ranks of the Squadroon regarded these genial dwellers in remote and shadowy regions with a kind of detached affection.

To a person concerned with the condition of his fellow man, observant of the varieties of character, and interested in the motions of the human and the equine mind, the Squadroon afforded a wide field of operation.

In the officers' mess there was a continual fusion of the old order and the new. Before the war all cavalry officers were men of social standing and ample means. They were often proud of their position, and sometimes inclined to be contemptuous of people less favoured. The Cavalry still contains large numbers of this class; but it is now about equally composed of officers drawn from various other and less opulent grades of society. This mingling of the different social grades was luminously exemplified in the Squadroon. We had officers who bore great names that had long been illustrious in the history of England; we had officers who owned large estates and big fortunes; officers whose fathers had risen from obscurity to affluence; officers who had made centuries at Lords; officers who had been distinguished by their prowess in all the various fields of athletics and of sport. We

had officers, too, who were yeomen farmers; officers of unknown origin and mysterious antecedents; officers who had risen from the ranks of the old pre-war Army; officers sprung from the office stool and from the lower rungs of the commercial ladder, who, before joining up, had never shot a bird or ridden a horse.

When the new order began to arrive there was naturally some conflict of the sensibilities. Their accent, their clothes, their table manners, their figures of speech, jarred at first on the polite nerves of the old order. And, on the other hand, the somewhat exaggerated refinements, the exquisite dress and the fashionable jargon of the old order, excited some amusement in the minds of the new. They had often seen and often laughed at some stage representation of a society fop. From pit and gallery they had long been familiar with the appearance and the speech of many of the most tremendous knuts of the dramatic world. But now for the first time in their lives they found themselves in close relationship with people who looked a part and spoke a language which hitherto they had known only upon the stage. And for a time they were not quite sure whether their new companions were not acting, and whether they were not expected to laugh at these seemingly affected utterances. Sometimes they did laugh, sometimes they sat in uneasy and suspicious silence, and sometimes, boldly entering into the spirit of the game, they joined in what they believed was an imitation of Gilbert the Filbert. So, in the beginning, awkward situations occasionally arose. But as time went on, the son of the people learned with wonder, from his own observation, how high a standard of honour, devotion and self-sacrifice lies hidden beneath the blasé manner of the Etonian.

And the Etonian learned, with equal surprise, what qualities of reliability, leadership and loyalty were almost always to be found in his colleague of less exalted origin.

Gradually the differences in breeding and deportment became less and less perceptible, and in course of time each entirely ceased to be conscious of the superficial peculiarities of the other. And in some cases deep and enduring friendship grew up between these beings of such widely different traditions and of such widely different circumstances.

Sometimes, however, an officer would join who fell short of the Squadroon's standard of playing the game. After long and patient trial, the Skipper would decide that he was unfitted for the sacred trust of thirty human lives. Then it mattered not whether he had wheeled a coster's barrow or whether he wore a coronet, he disappeared and was no more seen in the land.

Similarly, in the ranks, great changes were in process. Every trade and every denomination of the lower middle classes was represented in the Squadroon. The formerly peaceful civilian, who used to talk about the brutal and licentious soldiery, now learned to appreciate the rough and sterling qualities of the old soldier—his unfailing cheerfulness under all hardship, his indomitable courage in danger. And the old soldier, who used to look upon most civvies as softies, now discovered with half-incredulous wonder that clerks and shop-walkers could be true chums and stout fighters.

Between the officers and men there was a strong *camaraderie*, and a genuine feeling of affection. Any man of the most ordinary education could, if he so

desired, rise to a commission. Consequently, the ranks felt no animosity towards a superior class which had now been more than half made up from their own numbers, and no jealousy towards a caste into which they themselves could at any time enter. When, at intervals, the Squadroon was called upon to submit names of candidates for commissions, the number of applicants was always singularly small, and sometimes even none at all.

The officers took a deep interest in each individual man of their commands. They knew his character, qualities, foibles, trade in civil life, and all his domestic circumstances. And each man knew that if he found himself in any sort of difficulties, if he wanted any advice about his private affairs, or if he needed any help in his correspondence, he could always have the generous and whole-hearted help of his Troop Leader.

Out of such heterogeneous elements was the Squadroon compounded. But at the time of my arrival, the wise and liberal rule of a broad-minded Leader had welded all the divers parts into one harmonious whole.

CHAPTER II

MY COMPANIONS

LUCAS had taken me over to my billet.

"I'm afraid it's not up to much," he said, "but you see, ther're nine of us already fixed up and this is a small village. It's the only other room I could find."

I assured him that it would do me proud.

"Right-ho!" he said. "I'll send you over old Grampus for a first servant—he's pretty thick and awfully slow, but a steady old file and honest."

Grampus soon arrived breathing hard. I do not know whether at first I was more shy of him or he more shy of me. As we unpacked my kit I ventured on a few little commonplace pleasantries, but received no response except more hard breathing. Soon I discovered that he was hard of hearing as well as of breathing. By degrees, however, our mutual shyness wore off, and we became great friends.

My room was in a peasant-proprietor's modest, two-storied homestead. It was reached by a single flight of wooden stairs, narrowly enclosed, in gloom, between two walls. The room itself was small; it had a stone floor destitute of any sort of carpet or covering, and it contained a huge wooden double bedstead; a chest of drawers, of which the drawers were filled and locked, a

very small iron wash-hand-stand, a small rickety table, and one small rickety chair. The walls, which had once been colour-washed, were adorned with some prints of saints, a print of the Sacré-Cœur and a larger print of the Madonna and Child. Over the bed hung a crucifix. The one small window looked down on to an orchard and out across a stretch of fresh green pasture.

Since then I have been lodged in scores of small village houses of that type, and in all of them my room was almost exactly the same as in this first billet. The prominent features in each were the size and comfort of the wooden bed, and the presence of those touching emblems of piety. The simple French labourer on the soil understands well the pleasure and importance of a comfortable resting-place after the long hours of toil; and in their humble homes the circumstance of that repose, which repairs the wastage of the day and which gives new life and strength for the morrow, has, perhaps unconsciously to them, taken on almost the form and sanctity of a holy office.

I changed into slacks and walked over to the mess. All the young officers to whom I had already been introduced, and some others as well, were sitting around the fire, likewise in slacks. From a side table an enormous gramophone was rendering "Hello, my dearie, I'm lonesome for you." I was duly presented to those I had not met before and place was made for me in the circle around the fire. This room was large and lofty, with a wooden floor and three big double windows. It was evidently the *salon* of the house, very little used by the family themselves, and now, with characteristic thrift, hired out to us at the rate of four francs a day. A large oval table, which had been

lengthened for our accommodation by the insertion of two spare leaves, occupied the middle of the floor. This table was covered with a kind of washable oil-cloth, and the oil-cloth was now covered with a coarse cotton table-cloth, upon which an abundance of crockery and cutlery was laid out for dinner. Our kind hostess had included the loan of these necessary articles in the hire of the room, taking care, however, to cover the wear and tear by her exorbitant bills for farm produce. The room was rather loudly ornamented with glaringly gilded mirrors, illuminated texts, a heavily gilded clock in a glass case, and, also in a glass case, a Virgin and Child, profusely compassed around in gaud and tinsel. A few coloured prints, a few crude portraits or enlarged photographs of ancestors, the inevitable pictures of sacred persons, and a crucifix, hung upon the walls. In a conspicuous position hung a photograph of a member of the family laid out upon his death-bed. An exhibition so unexpected, appeared, to the British mind, ghastly and out of place as a drawing-room ornament. But such photographs are common throughout the homesteads of rural France. The people are altogether more simple and nearer to nature than are we in Britain. Their belief in the Bon Dieu is an ever-present reality in their lives; and not, as with us, spoken of only with awkwardness and shame. The bodily functions are regarded by them with no excess of delicacy. And the greater works of nature, birth and death, to which we attach such an awful importance, are accepted by them, calmly and without fear, as the will of God. To these simple people the new-born babe is beautiful, and the body of the beloved dead is beautiful; and so we find the photographs of both in their drawing-rooms.

Presently the door opened and a very tall, lean, loose-limbed officer lounged in.

"Hullo, Skipper, had a good day?" came a chorus from the fireside.

"Top-hole! awfully interesting. I'm as hungry as a blinking lion! Is dinner——" Then seeing me he came forward and shook hands. "So you've come to live with us, Padre? You'll find us simple people, plain of living and blunt of speech! Hullo! scoff up! come on, chaps!" And we sat down to dinner.

There was a winning frankness about the Skipper's manner and a charm about his drawling conversation that at once made me feel perfectly at home in my new surroundings.

Now there are two predominating factors in the life of France. One is the weather. Much of our time out here is passed in trenches and in the open air; and bivouacs, barrages, raids and battles can all be even exhilarating experiences under the genial warmth of summer skies. But continuous exposure to rain and bitter cold, long immersion in mud and freezing slime, depress even the most indomitable spirits. The other and supreme factor is one's company. In the constant society of dull and narrow companions, all days become monotonous and interminably long; all life spiritless and dreary. But in bright and congenial fellowship, even this hideous war can become a pilgrimage full of enchantment and of wonder. Long fast marches through the day, long slow marches through the night, short snatches of rest in ruined hovels, sojourns in stately châteaux, spells in the front line, weeks of working parties, the endless repetition of training, the wearisome routine of life in rest, occasional plunges into the gaiety of cities,

all seem in sympathetic company, one long joyous picnic. I, therefore, during this my first meal in the assembled mess of the Squadroon, took careful note of those who were going to be my close and constant companions of the future. For other reasons too the individualities of each were of great interest. It is a well-worn truth that Nature shows herself best in her smallest works; and that Aristotle first began his consideration of a commonwealth in a family. That craft to which we give the high and sounding name of Statesmanship is indeed no more than the difficult art of composing, for the common good, conflicting interests and conflicting passions with firmness, tact and equity. In every squadron and in every company, within a microscopic range of vision, there are always interests and passions in bitter conflict; and the qualities displayed in dealing with these conflicts, and the means employed in settling or aggravating them are, to the student of politics, a most entertaining and instructive spectacle. In every intimate community the personality of each individual imposes, in measure to its strength and vividness, an influence upon the whole. And I was now in the position of having laid bare, under my own eyes, the workings of the machinery of a miniature state.

I early discerned that I had the privilege of living in a remarkable mess. Each member, though some were still children in years, was a man of strong character and definite opinions. The one outstanding personality, though by no means the strongest character, was the Skipper. Not only in that little mess, but in any community whatever, his exceptional gifts and his singular nature would, I think, have raised him to considerable prominence. He was

the most sophisticated person I have ever known. None knew better than himself his own strength and his own weakness; no one was more fully aware of his own great virtues and his own great faults. He always thanked God, he said, that he was so hopelessly weak-minded, because that was the reason of his having had such a wonderfully good time, as he had never had the strength of mind not to do anything that he wanted to do. And he always attributed the peculiar sweetness of his own nature to the fact that in all his life he had never been seriously out of love. In his youth, his whole-hearted and exuberant joy of life, his charm of manner, his wonderful good nature, his lively wit and inexhaustible fertility of fancy, his chivalry, his love of all kinds of adventure, his versatile skill in every form of sport and game, his zeal and enthusiasm in his military duties, had won for him a wide-spread popularity.

So wide indeed was this popularity that it would have entirely spoiled many a boy of stronger character than his. But underneath the gay and careless exterior there were saving depths of thought, and of soundness, and a strong native honesty. His own emotions were deep and fiery. When he loved, man, woman, or dog, he loved to the full capacity of his glowing heart. The cause of a friend was his cause, to the uttermost extent of his service, his purse and almost even of his life. His every undertaking, from autumn manœuvres to a supper-party, was undertaken with a flaming enthusiasm. The low passion of hate was entirely wanting in his disposition. And he had the keen and almost instinctive penetration which always goes with natures so highly sensitive. Consequently, as years went on, he learned with

sorrowful disillusionment that the good which he so freely ascribed to others existed often only in his own imagination, and that the emotions, the passions, the enthusiasms of the world in which he lived were, in comparison to his own, cold and shallow. The world was ever ready to take all and give nothing. This discovery, which in no way altered the outward manner of his existence, sowed in him the seeds of cynicism and raised in his mind troublesome doubts concerning the purpose of the life that he continued to lead. He was still the leader of his garrison, still the sought-after favourite of dinner-party and dance. But he understood now how worthless a thing is the public favour; how soon idolism can turn to envy and to malice; how rare a grace is gratitude; how seldom leap up the immortal fires of the soul, except in petty angers and in petty hatreds; how fleeting friendship can be when the smallest demand is put upon it.

So, because he understood these things, his popularity sat light upon him. He often returned to his quarters, far into the morning, after a night of revelry, of which he had been acclaimed the life and soul, with no satisfaction at his success, filled only with contempt for himself and disgust at the emptiness of it all; yet knowing well that he would do the same again and again. Like all ardent and generous spirits he was an enthusiastic hero-worshipper; and, in proportion as his belief in human sublimity decreased, his admiration of his favourite hero, Jesus, increased. At about the time of the outbreak of war, he had, although virtually living the same old life, arrived by some process of his own at a rather antiquated form of philosophy. The most precious thing on earth, he held, was happiness. The highest dispensation of

man was to radiate happiness. And the greatest happiness of man was to see none but happy faces around him. While striving to live up to this principle he expected to find in return only ingratitude, deceit, and often the contempt which mistakes forbearance for weakness. And when, as was inevitable, there was an unconscious response, often from the most unexpected quarters, he knew a greater joy than he had ever experienced in the revelries and sporting achievements of his youth. A new faith in mankind began to grow in him. Again he trusted fully, and, where the trust of another man might have been betrayed, his trust was rarely betrayed. And, on the rare occasions when it was betrayed, he felt no anger; only that unsatisfactory satisfaction which we all feel at the fulfilment of some ominous prediction of our own.

In the second year of the war a wound had completely broken his constitution. This bodily misfortune had undoubtedly had a great share in bringing him to the moral standpoint at which I found him on my arrival. He was thirty-one years of age, with a faith unfaithful in humanity, an illimitable love and tolerance in his heart; so weak that he had sometimes to be helped on to his horse; and with a content and happiness in his mind which no suffering could diminish and which no disappointment could embitter.

Nevertheless, with all his broad understanding and with all his just estimation of the vanities of human nature, he was himself childishly vain of many things childishly vain of his long row of ribbons, of his red and blue chevrons, of his wound stripes. He was childishly delighted, too, with praise of himself or of his pupils by a superior, and could be stimulated to

the most extraordinary efforts by a small word of appreciation. And, on the other hand, he was impatient of correction, and apt to be momentarily resentful and even insubordinate if sharply reproved, though the dark mood passed quickly again into cheerful, smiling reason. And, in spite of his boundless tolerance for the frailties of others, certain phases of human shallowness, such as the attitude of the conscientious objectors, the incredibly rapid remarriage of war widows, the howl of the men of forty-five, who, having sent their sons to death with such patriotic fortitude, protested so abjectly in the press against the most minor service on their own part—sheltering, as it were, behind the bleeding bodies of their children—the screams of terror and the frenzied shrieks to stop the war that arose as soon as a bomb fell within earshot of certain people, who, until that moment, had been loudly demanding that the war must be carried on, no matter at what cost of blood, until Germany should be utterly crushed, moved him sometimes to contemptuous denunciation. And more often his ire was excited by the calm assurance with which the middle-aged arrogated the right of exemption from all danger or hardship until every young budding life should first have been sacrificed.

His language was often astoundingly foul-mouthed and blasphemous, and he spoke sometimes on delicate subjects with a brutal directness that, in other people, might have jarred horribly upon the sensibilities. Through its whole long course the war has had a steadily coarsening influence upon the manners and the speech of those engaged in it. Yet somehow this did not seem to me to be reason enough that a person of delicate fibre, and one whose chief delight was the

soul-filling organ notes of Milton, should often use language which a Thames bargee might well envy. It may have been the protest of a vigorous honesty against all manner of sham and sanctimonious hypocrisy; but I am more inclined to believe that he was deliberately preaching, under the cover of this popular guise, his own somewhat unpopular doctrine. Ridicule, which is the most powerful weapon in the armoury of mankind, is one that has been used, through all the ages, with deadly effect against virtue. He now hit upon the ingenious device of turning their own proper weapons against folly and vice. In foul and filthy language he extolled all that was noble and endearing. The stark hideousness of sensuality and drunkenness he exposed in disgusting words of vivid and pitiless imagery, and with an irresistible humour that kept his audience in a roar of laughter. Such was his skill, if indeed preaching was his motive, that not one of his subalterns ever suspected they were being preached at.

This was the man who, from force of circumstances, from parity of age and from, in many points, a community of ideas, became my close companion through the crowded and tremendous happenings of the next eighteen months. He was the one constant quantity in our mess. Some of the others are still with the Squadroon; but there was a continuous coming and going. Classes and schools took a steady toll. The Divisional School, the Hotchkiss Gun School at Le Touquet, the Equitation School at Cayeux, the Tactical School at Dieppe, the Musketry Schools, the Army School of Scouting and Sniping, the Signalling School near Amiens, all deprived us of members of our family for varying periods of

varying strenuosity. Sickness, and the frequent accidents incidental to a close association with horses claimed a number of victims. Wounded heroes proceeded in pain and pride to Blighty. In most cases all these returned in due course to the fold, and the vacant chairs were filled again. But after we had been in action there were usually empty places at our board and empty places in our hearts that would never again be altogether filled.

In the Infantry action is continuous and life is short. In the Cavalry action is less frequent and life is longer. Consequently, in the Cavalry there matures a closer *camaraderie* and a deeper affection which gives to every casualty a heavy weight of loss and sorrow.

And now, Uncle John, I must carefully guard against a strong temptation. If the truth be known, I had, for some time, forgotten the purpose with which I embarked upon this book. Sitting here, in my mediæval castle on a summit of the wintry Ardennes, dominating far and wide the wooded steeps, the mazy rivers and the straggling hamlets of newly liberated Belgium, I had, I fear, forgotten you and the promise I had made. I promised you that I would, to the best of my poor ability, draw an impressionist sketch of Cavalry life in France. And now I find myself becoming deeply involved in the fortunes of the Squadroon. It would indeed be a labour of love to try and paint the natures of every one of those boys whom I came to know so well; to draw their many foibles and their many failings as well as their sterling virtues; for we love our friends —faults and all. It would be a labour of love to delineate their features, to portray their persons in

living colours, to trace the development of their young minds, to record their characteristic utterances, so that you could seem to see them all, and to recognize each one individually by his distinctive peculiarities of manner and appearance; and so that you could seem to hear, above the loud notes of the gramophone, the merry din, the pointedly personal chaff, the rough and tumble, and the spirited arguments of our mess. Knowing your deep interest in psychology, I am tempted to try and describe, each by each, their origins, the many influences that tended to form their characters, the different ways—and with what results—they handled their men, their widely different outlooks on life. And, more interesting still, the extraordinarily rapid expansion of intellect which, in so many cases, was brought about in them by the conditions of war. But the biography of any single high-spirited boy, during the period of his war service, would in itself fill a weighty volume. And the number of such boys who passed through the Squadroon during my sojourn with it was legion.

So, resolutely resisting a temptation which would make this book inordinately long, and which would throw into a false perspective the tremendous operations in which we bore so small a part, I must show you superficial glimpses only of these boys as they appear now and then, for a fleeting moment, on the moving picture of our portentous pilgrimage.

CHAPTER III

BILLETS

AT the time of my arrival the Regiment had just sent up a large working party to the neighbourhood of Loos. This party had taken away from the Squadroon more than half its effective strength. The result was that we found ourselves in the situation most distressing to the cavalryman, of having only one man to every four or even five horses; and consequently of having the whole of our time taken up with the monotonous routine of watering, feeding, grooming and exercising this large number of animals with a so small proportion of men. Exercise was held before breakfast; and, to ease things as much as possible by getting all the horses exercised in one party, every officer turned out, riding one of his own chargers and leading the other two. In this way both first and second servants were set free to lend a much-needed hand in their own Troops.

Theoretically, this exercise was a fruitful period of instruction. A great deal was said and written about it by the Higher Command. It provided a providential outlet for the literary activities of an energetic but out-of-work Staff. A continual stream of paper concerning it flowed steadily down the proper

channels to the Troop and Section Leaders, gathering volume in its course from the suggestions and remarks of the offices through which it passed. A time like this, the pamphlets ran, when, owing to the absence of the working party, we were entirely relieved of Regimental, Brigade and Higher Training, was exceptionally favourable to the training of the individual. While out at exercise, it was ordained, Squadron Leaders would propound tactical problems to their subalterns; subalterns would in turn pass these on to their Section Leaders; Section Leaders would instil them into the bony heads of their men. Map reading would be thoroughly and systematically carried out. Dismounted action and led horse drill would be practised. No time could be more suitable than exercise for Road Equitation and the intellectual development of the horse. These, and a hundred other injunctions of divers sorts, descended upon us daily. The ideas and the principles were in all cases admirable. But between theory and practice there is a great gulf fixed. No General believes that a Section can ever be of less than six men. No General believes that one man ever has to groom more than two horses. And no General has ever been up early enough in the morning to see a party out at exercise.

Indeed, on those sharp mornings of early winter, exercise in itself was a whole-time enterprise, fraught with pain and peril. At the start our fingers were numbed with cold. The horses were fresh and cold-backed. We tried to rein our bucking steed with one numbed hand, while with the other numbed hand we tried to hold on to two or even three kicking, jumping, plunging, screaming brutes. A space of about a hundred yards of road was filled by this seething

union of unhappy men and fractious animals. Heels and teeth flashed in all directions to the accompaniment of shrill squeals and bass blasphemy. Dull thuds resounded as a well-directed kick got home on the ribs of another horse; and angry imprecations filled the air when, as often happened, some rider was badly kicked or bitten. After a few minutes of movement things quieted down somewhat; but under these circumstances it was quite impossible to do more than to impress upon the men the names of the villages we went through, and the names of the conspicuous land-marks and villages visible on the surrounding country-side.

Exercise usually took about an hour. Afterwards we trooped in to breakfast with heads cleared, with a pleasing glow of moral virtue and physical warmth, in the very best of spirits and with the heartiest of appetites. The Skipper alone looked grey and drawn after the exertion and made his meal off one boiled egg and a glass of hot water; but his disabilities in this respect were a continual subject of *badinage*, and only tended to increase the hilarity of the occasion, especially when he rose from this rigid diet, and, if there happened to be any in the mess, devoured large quantities of chocolate. He knew quite well that chocolate was as bad for him as is drink for the drunkard, but in spite of laughing adjurations to be strong, and half-serious efforts to keep it away from him by force, he could no more resist chocolate than the drunkard can resist drink.

At one time and another I have lived in many kinds of communities, in private houses and hotels, in clubs and messes, in hospitals and camps, on shipboard and in trains. In none of them had breakfast ever

been more than a mildly sociable function, in most of them it had been heavily overclouded with gloom, and in some of them, even to break silence at it had been positively dangerous. This light-hearted gaiety and voluble mirth at the breakfast table then, seemed to me a singular peculiarity of the Squadroon.

After breakfast we sat around the fire for half an hour or so, smoking the morning pipe. The consummation of this pleasurable rite was generally attended by animated discussions on a wide variety of subjects. Sometimes, with little knowledge and much conviction, we laid down the law on weighty matters of *Weltpolitik* and higher strategy. Sometimes we deliberated, with more knowledge and less conviction, on the home affairs of the Squadroon. Sometimes, if not in argumentative mood, we unmercifully ragged some one of our number, adding mild violence perhaps, to the force of our pungent and personal invective. Then the subalterns went out to stables, leaving the Skipper, Purple Lucas, our Second-in-Command, and myself in undisputed possession of the mess. Purple, you remember, was the methodical, unemotional, good-natured officer who received me on my arrival in the Squadroon. He took little part in the many arguments that raged about his ears, unless his opinion was directly challenged, and then, if he did make a statement at all, it was definite and sound. He now sat in his favourite position, with his chair tilted back, his feet up on the mantelpiece, his hands in his pockets and with the muscles standing out on either side of his purple-tinged face from the exertion of supporting Archie. Archie, the darling of his heart, was a huge and ponderous pipe. Its bowl had become so choked up that it held no more than a thimbleful

of tobacco; nevertheless Purple positively declined either to scrape it out or to exchange it for any normal pipe of a quarter the weight and four times the capacity. Carefully releasing it with both hands from the vice-like grip of his jaws, he swung it clubwise against the fender till a few ashes fell out and the house shook to its foundations. Then, pulling a chair up to the table, he soon became deeply immersed in figures and finance. Presently word was brought that the S.Q.M.S. wished to see him. This excellent person, by whose grace we ate our daily bread, was at once admitted. An old reservist of many years' service, he combined with his handsome figure and melodious voice, a great measure of that charm and humour, and a great measure of that natural dignity of bearing which is the heritage of Erin's poorest sons. He was conscientious and constitutional in all his works. On those few occasions in the year when, by the unwritten law, it is permitted to the soldier to get drunk, he got thoroughly, conscientiously and constitutionally drunk. At all other times he was a model of decorum and propriety. One grave failing indeed he had; a failing that is common to the Celtic blood. He could not keep out of a scrap. When the Squadroon was engaged in open warfare, surrounding villages or bounding from ridge to ridge, when it was in action, counter-attacking a hard-held wood or desperately holding on to some steel-swept slope, there, sooner or later, in the forefront of the battle, would be found Micky O'Grady. Rifle in hand he gloried in the tumult and the fury of the fray. Towering in the van, he shouted exultant yells of encouragement and defiance to friend and foe, oblivious of his neglected duties far behind, oblivious of the corn and forage we

should never see, oblivious of the rum and rations we should never taste. No reprimands however sharp, no wounds however frequent, could keep him for very long, in times of stress, back with his waggons or away from the firing line.

Purple and he soon became involved in profound mathematical calculations, working out the prices at which canned salmon, sardines, cling peaches, wild woodbines, tame brasso and the other multitudinous flora and fauna of the canteen could be sold in order to yield a profit of four per cent.

"Come on, Padre," said the Skipper, rising. "We won't be a party to these shady proceedings of the financial underworld! Let's go and have a look at the old hairies!"

So we strolled out to "stables."

The eighth wonder of the world is the way in which a tiny village can absorb and give shelter to an incredibly large number of horses. When we stepped out on to the single main street of the village, not a horse was visible, nor was there any building which gave the slightest suggestion of being able to house horses. But the Skipper led me through front doors, down little alleys, up secret passages, around outhouses, into barns, cowsheds, cartsheds, granaries, under the arches of gateways, and to all sorts of unexpected places in which horses were more or less comfortably lodged. In one shed three cows and two horses fed out of the same manger in peace and amity. In another the space was equally divided between a pack pony and a pig. In another several sheep jostled the horses for their hay. Under lean-to's and gateways horses were tethered to carts, and to many sorts of agricultural implements. There were too, providentially,

a fair number of dilapidated and deserted out-houses. These were made, apparently, of mud on a foundation of lattice. Much of the mud had fallen away, leaving great gaping holes to the wind and rain. Owing to the war money was tight; every vigorous male was away with the colours and all female labour was more than fully occupied in the fields. So these outhouses were allowed to fall further and further into desuetude and decay: an ill-wind which, however, blew great good to our horses. We covered over the holes in the roof with tarred felt, we screened the gaps in the walls with canvas, we cleansed the floors of their deep deposits of filth, and we proudly led our horses, sometimes up or down a number of steps, into these palatial homes.

We were received on the confines of his territory by Tubs, the Leader of the First Troop. He drew up his short rotund figure and saluted with precision and gravity. Then he niggled his knees nervously together, and his round, dark face assumed an expression of almost childlike apprehension. It was evident that he suffered from extreme shyness in the presence of me, a stranger. His appearance and deportment in no way coincided with the popular conception of a leader of light horse.

Fiction and the drama have agreed to represent the young cavalry officer as a debonair and dashing personality, not overburdened with brains, beautiful of figure, slender of limb, richly raimented, wonderfully booted, adored of the fair, the idol of the boudoir and the envy of the ballroom. In the sterner field of war he is depicted as inspiring his men with his ringing words of glory; as performing, sword in hand, prodigies of personal valour, and as having won the

undying admiration and love of his companions and subordinates by those same external qualities of voice and person, and by his animal quality of courage.

Tubs did not by any means fill this accepted picture of a leader of men. He had none of the god-like beauty, none of the dazzling physical attributes, none of the rich resounding voice. He was short and round, he stammered a little, and he had a tendency to loudness in his dress. His heart loved yellow handkerchiefs, yellow waistcoats, bright buttons and shining badges. In the presence of high seniors he suffered much, and so great was his shyness that he was often rude when he wished most to be polite, and often miserably at his worst when he wished most to impress. According then to prescriptive standards, he was not the beau-ideal of a subaltern of Light Dragoons. But his seniors asserted that in all the British Army there was no finer Troop Leader, no officer who could get more willing work out of his men, than Tubs. For externals are proverbially deceptive, and the hero of real life is usually a less ornamental person than the hero of romance. An untiring application to his work, a thorough knowledge of all his duties, a rigorously conscientious discharge of these duties under all circumstances, cheerfulness in hardship, cool clear-headed skill in action, and a warm and practical benevolence towards his men, united with that kindly sense of humour which lights up for us the minds of others, are the only hoops of steel by which an officer can grapple to himself the hearts of his men; and by such a chain of sterling steel had Tubs closely bound his Troop to himself,

"How now, Tubs?" said the Skipper, returning

his salute, "what of the First Army? Anything untoward?"

"No—all right," replied Tubs seriously.

He had that indefinable but by no means uncommon air of almost asking to be ragged by the humorous, and, I should imagine, of asking to be bullied by the bully. We walked around his scattered commando, remarking on the condition of the horses, looking at the shoes of some, feeling the legs and examining the injuries of others. Each Section Leader called his own little command to attention as we entered his area, walked around his horses with us, and answered any questions concerning his Section which the Skipper might put to him.

Having gone the round of the First Army horses, we were on the point of departing for the Second Army, when Tubs exclaimed:

"I've fixed up a new table in our mess-room," and added with wistful eagerness, "Will you come and see it?"

"Rather!" said the Skipper.

Tubs led the way, followed by Arthur Jenner, the M.G.G.S. of the First Army, or, in other words, his Troop Sergeant.

Arthur's was the distinction of being the first British soldier to draw German blood in the war with the white weapon, having killed with his own sword two Uhlans while out with a patrol on one of the early days of the retreat from Mons. A farmer in civil life, like most farmers he regarded all innovation and progress with sceptical and sardonic pessimism. It was evident now from the expression on his face that he did not hold with wasting time and money on such fal-lals as mess tables.

We entered the front room of a small cottage. An iron cooking-range occupied one end. On one side of the range Madame was baking apples: little old wizened apples, just like her poor little old wizened self. On the other side two great black dixies bubbled and steamed under the expert supervision of Scully, the Troop bobberchie. We greeted Madame in indifferent French; we said the war was "no bon" and that we hoped it would soon be over. Then, after listening patiently for some time to the copious recital of her woes, we turned to inspect the new table. It was a plain affair, long, and made of rough planks. Along either side was an equally plain and solid bench. But plain and simple as this furniture was, it afforded immense comfort to the men, who without it would have had to take their meals standing on their feet, or sitting on the cold and stone-flagged floor.

The mess tins of the men, all bright and shining, their knives, forks and spoons were already laid out for dinner.

"What are we on to-day, Scully?" asked the Skipper.

"Stew, sir."

"H'm! a novelty!" said the Skipper. "Let's have a look at it."

Scully raised the lid of the nearest dixie, disclosing a seething mass of nasty grey matter.

"That's the fourth day running you've put 'em on stew. I wonder they don't murder you, Scully! Can't you manage a roast?"

"Meat ration too small, sir. Got some werry nice biscuit duff in 'ere," indicating the other dixie. "They eats it wiv jam."

"How were rations to-day?"

"Pretty middlin', sir, excep' the meat. Three men in a loaf. The bacon is short and werry bad—and no veg; but they're pretty middlin' on the 'ole, sir."

"They still each subscribe a franc a week for extras, don't they?" asked the Skipper.

"Yes," said Tubs. "This week we got some cabbage, Brussel sprouts, a tin of cornflour, two tins of tomato and some milk."

"Stuff to give 'em," said the Skipper.

We then made a minute inspection of the little room. The Skipper was almost as finical as a medical officer about meat safes, fly traps, putting bread into nose-bags, immaculacy of utensils, and all those measures which are supposed to prevent the outbreak of disease.

"Where's your grease-trap, Scully?" he asked.

Scully led us out into the back yard and proudly showed us this device so dear to the medical heart. The Skipper looked at it long and earnestly.

"Don't look as if it's been used much," he said at last.

"It's new, sir—only made it this morning. The old one got choked up, so I filled it in and made this 'ere," said the ever-ready Scully, pointing out a little mound a few yards off.

Looks of deep meaning passed between Tubs, Arthur Jenner and Scully. Arthur Jenner, Scully and the Armée Britannique in general did not hold with grease-traps. But the Skipper was delighted with the new table and the whole mess room.

"Nice work!" he exclaimed as he went out. "But what did you pay for it?"

Tubs named a small sum.

"Right! I'll ask Purple if he can spare it out of the canteen."

"Oh no, really not, Skipper," said Tubs. "It's nothing—I'd really rather pay it myself."

"All right, old boy, if you insist—awfully good of you."

As we walked along to the next Troop, the Skipper expounded his views on such payments by an officer out of his own purse.

"Up to quite a short time ago," he said, "all our boys had plenty of money. A Troop Leader's reputation depended on the fatness of his horses. The Government ration was not enough to keep them even in condition. If he wished then either to win praise for the big condition of his horses or to escape continual nagging on account of their thinness, he had to spend large sums of money on extra corn and fodder out of his own pocket. As the war went on, temporary officers began to join the Cavalry. Many of these, who were of humble origin, had no private means whatever. Some were married, some had relations dependent upon them, and their pay was hardly enough to keep even themselves, much less to support the weight of these additional burdens. To maintain thirty odd horses would not only have been to them a grievous charge, but would have been totally beyond the powers of their purse. Consequently, although they might have worked harder, their horses compared unfavourably with those of their richer comrades." So the Skipper had laid down a positive rule in the Squadroon that no officer was to pay a single farthing of his own for the food of his horses. "If any rich bloke," he said, "likes to add a little to the comfort of his men, that's quite

another matter—and one that won't in any way help him on in the Service at the expense of his poorer brethren. But as to the horses, no one feels more for the poor hungry devils than I do! But in my humble opinion their starvation is a matter between the Government and the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and not one for indiscriminate charity!"

"Surely it's not as bad as that?" I asked, much shocked. I had still to learn that the Skipper was somewhat given to extravagance in his images of speech.

He laughed.

"Well, with a great deal of slave-driving the men, constant grazing, everlasting pinching and scraping, feeding, watering and haying up every other hour, we can just get them big enough to pass a General's inspection. But there's no foundation; and, after a couple of days in action, they fall away to rags again. And even then, whenever we graze, heavy claims follow us. So we still have to pay a good deal. The only difference is that, as I am responsible for everything that happens in the Squadroon, I pay these claims instead of the Troop Leaders. Of course," he continued in a stage whisper, "it may be a deep and dark policy on the part of the authorities to keep the horses hungry, so that when they see the Hun, they'll tear and eat him—that is if they ever do see him," he added a little bitterly. "At present they only tear the seats out of the men's breeks; and we can't get them replaced for love or money, wheedling or wangling. A rear view of the Squadroon on Church parade is hardly decent even now. I shudder to think what it will be like if we don't get some clothing up soon."

We now approached the borders of the Second Army. Dane, the Army Commander, came forward to meet us. He walked with wide, slow deliberate steps, his broad shoulders humped, his massive rugged head thrown forward, and his bulldog jaw sunk deep into his chest. His complexion, usually yellow, was now a damp and deathly white, which, with him, was the danger signal of volcanic passions seething within. He saluted, exclaimed with bitter woe that during the night half a sack of corn had disappeared from his feed store, and burst forthwith into a voluble denunciation of certain person or persons unknown but strongly suspected of this heinous theft. He vehemently urged the Skipper to have half the Squadroon court-martialled on the spot, and to inflict on the other half field punishment up to the utmost limit of his powers. While this storm of invective was still raging, the Second Sergeant, who had been away parading the sick, arrived upon the scene. He explained that owing to the feeble lock and rickety door of the feed store, he had taken away the half-sack of corn, and, for greater security, had locked it up in his own billet, where it was even now reposing in perfect safety. Dane's face expressed mingled sheepishness and delight; sheepishness at having "created" about nothing; delight at having recovered his lost treasure.

His career had been somewhat singular. He had been at a Public School. During his last year, when preparing for the examination into Sandhurst, financial misfortune had overtaken his family, and he had enlisted as a trooper in the cavalry of the line. Three years later, on the outbreak of war, he went with his Regiment over to France in the rank of Corporal, and was early promoted to a commission

for distinguished conduct in the field. But he never forgave Fate the scurvy trick which she had played him at the outset of his career; and he had brought with him, from his three years' service in the ranks, all the old soldier's inveterate habit of cribbing at every trifling inconvenience in times of ease and plenty. The circumstances of those last years of adolescence had tinged with bitterness against the fortunate and the happy a mind by nature already gloomy and morose. He trusted no one; his hand was against every man; he had a morbid belief that every man's hand was against him. He proclaimed himself agin the government, a radical, a socialist; although he had no real understanding of what these terms might mean. But he had brought with him also from the ranks all the old soldier's inveterate habit of being more than worth his weight in gold in times of hardship and danger. And, deep down in his heart, beneath this superficial sea of ugly passions, he cherished a strong affection for his comrades, a paternal benevolence for his Troop and a very exceptional love for all animals. From sunrise till after the night feed he spent almost the whole of his time among his horses, taking the utmost pains and the keenest delight in devising any means that could at all add to their welfare. So, because we all knew the solid virtues and the warmth that dwelt in his heart, we either regarded as a huge joke or took no notice whatever of his occasional dark and sulky moods, and his occasional outbursts of uncontrolled temper.

The affair of the half-sack of corn having come to a sudden and satisfactory end, we hastily changed the subject and went on to look at Dane's horses. Rumour had it that, if there was a likelihood of our

remaining much longer in our present billets, a Corps horse show was going to be held. The laurel most coveted by keen young officers was the prize for the best conditioned and best turned out Troop. Dane had already put his heart and soul into carrying off the palm. Clippers and singeing lamps were everywhere at work. Barny O'Leary, the skilful puller of hairs, ceaselessly plied his light, deft fingers through mane and tail. Spud Mitford bandaged legs and tails with exquisite art and sounds soothing to the equine ear. Jock Mason plaited manes with an elegance that might have excited the admiration of a silken-tressed maiden of bashful fifteen. The Skipper and Dane, who had in common a wide knowledge and a deep interest in horsemastership, carefully appraised the condition and appearance of each horse. Dane then led us, with some pride, into his new feed store. This was a little wooden shanty, which had been built by his Second Sergeant and himself. On the door was conspicuously posted up a large notice, showing the time, quantity and composition of each feed, and the times of watering. Inside Paddy Gilligan sat on a log of wood, chopping chaff with a small hand axe. In one corner stood a huge cauldron, simmering with a savoury mess of pottage, destined to add sweetness and nourishment to the evening feed. Opposite was a bed-like framework of close meshed wire, on which the hay was shaken, so that the nutritious seed sifted through and was caught on a waterproof sheet spread out beneath. Near it was a large biscuit tin, in which linseed cake was soaking, with a thick stick protruding, with which to stir the slowly dissolving, glutinous mass. Turned inside out and hung out to dry on a line, were the nosebags, each nosebag

inscribed in large letters with the name of the horse to which it belonged. Outside the door lay the haynets, already filled. Dane, who usually helped to make out the feeds himself, carefully examined the linseed and the chaff. He and the Skipper then entered into a long discussion about some technical detail as to the advisability or not of giving hay before corn or corn before hay at certain times of the day, taking into consideration the horse's phenomenal length of bowel and extraordinary smallness of stomach. The delicate point having been satisfactorily settled, we were just walking away, when Dane followed us.

"Oh, by the by, Skipper," he said, "I've just fixed up a top-hole bit of grazing with the old man in my farm! He's been awfully decent about it, says we're quite welcome, and it will do the land no end of good."

"Good!" said the Skipper. "But you're quite sure there's no misunderstanding?"

"Oh no, none whatever," said Dane, laughing heartily.

When we had left, the Skipper turned to me with a twinkle in his eye.

"I know these enthusiastically amicable arrangements between old Dano and the civvies!" he said. "They usually end in a thumping great claim and a pile of correspondence as high as Mount Everest." He mused in silence for a while, and then, as though voicing his thoughts, he said, "The only trouble about Dano is, not that he might neglect his work, but that he might overdrive his men. I'm sure, on the whole, though, that within reasonable limits the harder they are kept at work and play the happier

they are. I only go around his Troop about twice a week, and then only because I know he loves showing off the improvement in his horses and all his latest little wheezes. It's the right sort of——"

"Mon capitaine, capitaine!"

Arrested by this cry and the sound of hurrying, shuffling footsteps, we stopped and looked behind us. An old, slight man, with bent back, nut-cracker face, toothless gums and a stubbly beard, hobbled up to us with the aid of a stout gnarled stick. He burst into a torrent of words of mingled respectfulness and abuse. His breathlessness, his indignation, the rapidity with which he spoke, and his extreme paucity of front teeth made his speech most difficult to understand. We gathered that he had laid up a store of hay in his loft against the winter—to feed to his beasts, and that he had just discovered a hole in the wall through which certain pigs had been for a long time stealing this hay. We took pigs to be a figurative word for British soldiers. At this point of his impeachment he became totally unintelligible from fury. The Skipper was not a master of the French language. He patted the old man kindly on the back and directed him to the mess. There, he said, the old man would find the Capitaine en Second, who knew well how to understand the so beautiful language of Picardy, and who, after thorough investigation, would see, if indeed we were to blame, that full reparation was made. The old man hobbled off, muttering angrily. Such words as "*cochons*," "*sales bêtes*," and a vehement declaration that the Anglais were worse than the Boches, were wafted back to us, his voice becoming louder as the distance between us and him increased.

The Skipper leaning on his thick ash plant, watched the pathetic, retreating form.

"No wonder they hate us so," he said at last.

"Hate us?" I asked in surprise. "Why, I thought they were all over their brave British Allies!"

"Well, look at that poor old devil. Two of his sons were killed at Notre-Dame de Lorette; the other is away with his Regiment in Champagne. There's only himself and that fat daughter of his to keep their show going—and we go and pinch their hay!"

"But we don't know yet that our fellows pinched it!" I protested.

"Of course they did!" said the Skipper. "And when rations are short they pinch potatoes too—dig out the roots and carefully put back the plants. And if you and I were in their place we'd do the same! It's to prevent all that sort of thing and the consequent unpleasantness that Troop Leaders get their men to subscribe so much a week to buy vegetables."

"But you don't really think they hate us? They must know we're not in their blessed country for our own amusement! And, besides, they make pots of money out of us."

"Perhaps they don't hate the Infantry. Our *men* generally get on excellently with them after they've settled in a bit. But Cavalry are bound to be unpopular. You see, the horse is always so hungry that he's an omnivorous animal—and he does an enormous amount of damage. He strips trees, he eats doors, mangers, hayracks, posts and rails, carts and agricultural implements. He kicks the bottom out of his standings, and he shoves his silly head through the flimsy walls of the outhouses. When out on schemes or manœuvres he destroys crops wholesale, and, when he is theoretically

grazing on the roadside, pastures, which are the sole winter maintenance of the local cow, often have a way of mysteriously disappearing. No, it's an unflattering reflection, but the arrival of the gay and gallant Light Dragoon in a French village is never welcome—because of his inseparable association with that voracious and destructive quadruped, the 'oss!"

I was beginning to make due allowance for the Skipper's little habit of exaggeration.

We sauntered on, up a little side street to the domain of the Third Army. Jimmie and Jerry received us with the usual compliments. In appearance Jimmie was more like the cavalry subaltern of romance than any other I have ever seen in the flesh. He was of middle height and slender form, with a keen, eager, handsome face, fair curly hair and clear blue eyes. He wore clothes and boots of the latest cut and fashion, but of quiet tones and in perfect taste. His voice was rich and full, and he moved with an air of easy confidence. By forging his birth certificate he had managed to pass through Sandhurst and out to France when he was only seventeen years old. And now, though still a child in years, he was a veteran soldier in experience. In his short life he had seen more of misery and horror, more of agony and death, more of nobility and devotion, than is seen by the ordinary person in the whole course of a long and eventful lifetime. He had the strength of character, the fixity of purpose and the worldly knowledge of a man of more than twice his age. A certain hardness, the lines about his face, his general deportment, were those of a man well on in the thirties; and only at rare intervals the soul of the child looked pathetically out from under this mask of manhood, startling the observer into momentary and

protective pitifulness. There would in all probability have been a great career before him, if God had not willed it otherwise.

As we went the round of his horses, Jerry, his Troop Sergeant, a very gallant old soldier of a somewhat volatile and excitable nature, volunteered volumes of information on all sorts of relevant and irrelevant subjects, some small measure of which was undoubtedly correct. When we had seen the horses, Jerry cordially invited us to inspect the Troop Store. Jimmie's eyes shot him a murderous glance.

"I'm afraid those rifle racks aren't finished yet," he said, "we only managed to get the wood last night."

"Never mind," said the Skipper, "we'll have a look-see."

Jerry, with much officiousness, fussed ahead, and fumbled ostentatiously with a large and obviously newly bought lock. We entered a ramshackle room in a ramshackle little old house. Inside, the rifles of the Troop were neatly arranged along the wall. Above the rifles, from an exactly dressed line of nails, hung the swords, in their brightly burnished scabbards. Over these again hung a shining row of freshly painted tin hats, blazoned on either side with a rectangular patch of the Regimental colours. Along another wall stood the picks and shovels, painted black; above them the posh headropes, blancoed snowy white. Iron rations, spare shoes, ammunition, Véry pistols, ground flares, Troop flags and all kinds of equipment not in immediate use, were neatly stored and stacked around the remaining space. Everything polishable shone with brilliant lustre.

"I'm not awfully keen on all this spit and polish

myself," said the Skipper to me, in a low aside. "On a sunny day you can see a squadron shining like a helio seventy miles off. But orders are orders."

"Not ours to ask the reason why,
Ours but to shine and die!"

Jerry was immensely proud of the store, and beamed with gratification at the warm words of praise that were bestowed upon it.

Bidding au'voir to Jimmie, we leisurely strolled off towards the Fourth Army. This was established in a single large outlying farm, up a steep hill, about three-quarters of a mile away from the village. Retracing our steps down the main street of the village, we stopped for a moment to exchange greetings with the buxom proprietess of the *estaminet* "To the Reunion of the Good Cultivators," where, of an evening, the Squadroon quaffed washy French ale or throat-rasping "vin blank," and retailed with ever-growing snap and volume the latest rumours from the base. After a brief interchange of pleasantries, we continued on our way for a few yards, till our eyes were arrested by a conspicuous notice board, indicating by an arrow the direction of the Squadroon Canteen. The Canteen was one of the apples of the Skipper's eye.

"Let's have a look in at this busy scene of commercial activity," he said.

We proceeded about ten yards down a narrow uneven alley and looked in. It consisted of the tiny front room of a very small and empty house. The window, which was destitute of glass or frame, had been skilfully transformed into the semblance of a counter. Within, a number of shelves contained a

slender stock of those necessaries and delicacies which are dear to the soldier heart. Another tier of shelves contained a not inconsiderable library of widely assorted literature: books which had been, from time to time, the gift of different officers of the Squadroon. Inside, a short, stoutish, dapper man was hard at work carpentering. His coat was off, his sleeves were rolled up, and he sweated freely from the exertions of his labour. But, even under these unfavourable circumstances, he radiated an air of pre-eminent smartness in appearance and demeanour. He sprang to attention as we entered. His strong, healthy-hued face and his keen brown eyes were lighted up with the mingled lustre of intelligence and benevolence. His profile was not unlike that of Napoleon. I felt at once that I was in the presence of a great man.

"Good morning, Sergeant-Major," said the Skipper, and they fell forthwith into a long talk about the Squadroon band, the recreation room, the pierrot troop, the messing budget and the state of the canteen finances, in all of which concerns the S.M. was an enthusiastic and vital force.

"And how's business, McGeorge?" asked the Skipper, turning to the man behind the counter.

McGeorge was a canny old Scotsman, who united the treble office of S.Q.M.S.'s batman, storeman and Canteen keeper. He was an old reservist from Dundee, and he wore the ribbons of South Africa, Mons and the French Croix de Guerre, as well as two wound stripes.

"It's verra guid indeed, sir. We sell a-thing as fast as we get it up. The boys are aye wantin' mair cigarettes—and they're wantin' writing paper, that

we canna get. If you cud dae onything tae get us mair——"

The Skipper made a note in his pocket-book.

"Come on, Padre," he said, "the Fourth Army will have filed away from stables if we don't get a move on."

We proceeded to get a move on.

"I suppose," I said as we plodded up the hill, "that the canteen makes a goodish bit?"

"No," said the Skipper, "hardly anything at all. Just enough to carry on and to pay for teas after football matches and a few little things like that. It'd be a dam shame to make money out of a canteen."

"Some do," I said.

"We don't," said the Skipper. "I've an awful horror of accumulating funds from people who are never going to have the use of them—in the same way as I have a horror of dying myself with money unspent."

"It would be worse to die without money to spend," I replied.

"Yes, of course it would," admitted the Skipper, laughing. "I dare say, if I'd had the running of the Canteen myself, it would have gone smash long ago. But old Purple is a solid rock of sense. When I suggest hiring half a dozen rolling royces to take the Squadroon to the Corps Point to Point, or some other little trifle, a shade beyond our four per cent. profits, he firmly puts his foot down; and I have just enough financial sense not to press the point—so the Canteen gets along swimmingly."

"The S.M. seems a pretty smart sort of chap," I said, by way of making conversation.

"He is that. All S.M.'s are. You see, any average

ass can become a colonel or a general in the ordinary course of seniority, if he just hangs on and puts in his time. But it takes a super-man to become an S.M. Look at the hundreds of other men he has to compete against on equal terms during all the time he is climbing up to warrant rank! But even among the super class of S.M.'s my William Henry stands out head and shoulders. He's a most exceptional fellow. He's only a boy now, but he's been S.M. since Mons. We had another fellow, an S.M. and a great friend of his, who took a commission early on, and went off to Infantry. He was a most excellent fellow too, but not in the same street as William Henry—and when we last heard of him he was temporarily commanding a brigade. William Henry has been offered a commission over and over again, and he'd have risen like a rocket, but his heart and soul is in the Squadroon and nothing would induce him to leave it."

The hill was steep. We paused a few moments for breath.

"That old McGeorge is an excellent old chap too," he continued. "I shall never forget him in one of those infernal wood fights near Noyon. It was the usual shemozzle. No one knew where the hell anyone else was. Old Eiffel Tower and I and McGeorge and a couple of other men went down a cutting to try and get touch with the Frogs on our right. We soon came almost on to some fellows in grey. 'There they are,' I said, 'stop here and I'll go liaise.' 'L-l-l-look out! they're B-B-B-Boches,' said old Eiffel. 'They can't be,' I said—and on the instant they let fly at us. More Boches came rushing on, crashing through the wood, shouting and roaring horrid German noises. Poor Rumbold dropped stone dead; and then

old McGeorge toppled over like a shot rabbit. There wasn't much time to waste. We were surrounded on three sides. Poor old McGeorge never said a word, but gave us a look that will haunt me to my dying day. He lay there writhing like a dumb animal in agony. 'He's got a missis and three kids. C-c-c-can I have a t-t-t-try to get him away?' said old Eiffel. I nodded and took his rifle. Old Eiffel wiped his pince-nez, slung McGeorge across his shoulders, and started off back with his great long hairpin legs striding out all they knew. A wounded man's about the heaviest thing on earth. The other lad and I dropped down behind a bush, emptied our magazines into wherever Boches showed up through the undergrowth, and then we turned and legged it in most undignified haste. We soon caught up old Eiffel, who was pretty well done in; but he staggered along with McGeorge till we got to a bit of an old trench line where our people were holding on. And so old McGeorge was got away. He wrote regularly every week from hospital in Rouen, telling us how he was getting on; and as soon as he was discharged from hospital he never stopped worrying to get back to us. Hullo! here's old Bill."

The Fourth Army Commander met us at the gate of the great square courtyard of his farm. A Second Lieutenant in rank, he was a middle-aged man. His figure was short and sturdy, his face dark and weather-beaten, his turn-out soberly neat and trim. And he bore himself with that air of self-respect and native dignity by which the hereditary farmers of England are generally distinguished. He had served for years in a famous Yeomanry Regiment, had come out with it in the original Expeditionary Force as a

Corporal, had been promoted to Sergeant for gallantry after Mons, had risen to Squadron Sergeant Major, and had finally, with many misgivings and no pleasant anticipations, taken a temporary commission in a Regular Regiment.

"They've finished grooming, Skipper," he said, "they're getting on with their saddles."

"Right-ho! We'll have a look at the billets."

We were conducted to a small, bare room, containing only a huge wooden bed. This bed was shared by the two Sergeants. Then we were led across the filthy and malodorous farmyard, into a barn, and up a rickety ladder, to the loft. Through the gaps of missing tiles in the roof, and through chinks and holes in the wall, the wind moaned and whistled. A space of wooden flooring had been swept scrupulously clean. Along it, neatly folded, lay the blankets of the Troop. Over each man's blankets was his kit, arranged in the regulation manner.

"Pretty Arctic, what?" said the Skipper.

"Ah! That is cold," said Bill. "But they get a goodish bit of hay apiece to put under their blankets."

"How do you think you're fixed up here on the whole?"

"Pretty well on the whole, Skipper. Good stables, decent mess-room. The old people in the farm are very decent. They won't let us use the pond though, and it's a long way to water. But the men are quite happy—they like being on their own—and," added Bill with a smile, "I think the old lady gives 'em a good deal of *café avec!*"

"Oh! Quatre sous?"

"Ah, oui."

"What on earth are you talking about?" I asked.

Bill explained those idiomatic terms for coffee with a stiff tot of rum in it.

"Come on, Padre, this is no place for us!" said the Skipper, and we started home again.

When we reached the brow of the hill, the Skipper stopped and leaned on his thick ash stick. His face was drawn and grey, and he looked, as he always did after any exertion, utterly worn out. But he smiled broadly and made a comprehensive and somewhat dramatic gesture of his outstretched arm.

"Now, Padre, you've seen my little kingdom; my high officers of state, my great Army Commanders, my stalwart braves, my hungry steeds! Do you wonder I'm the happiest man in France? Seriously though, life is very easy and delightful for me with such splendid subalterns and such first-rate N.C.O.'s and men."

I made some what I hoped was appropriate answer. The Skipper, of course, was posing. He knew, and he knew that I knew, that in some measure the excellency of his subordinates was due to his own policy. The deliberate offender he punished to the full extent of his powers. But he never blamed the trier, however stupid his mistakes, and he encouraged every atom of initiative in every rank of his subordinates. Where such initiative resulted in failure or even in disaster, he took all the blame himself, although his vain nature bitterly resented blame. I felt now, as he leant back there, with both hands behind him, half sitting on his stick, that he wanted me to say something to this effect, so, being human, I remained silent.

In thoughtful silence, he looked out for some moments across the peaceful landscape to where, in

the far distance, a line of sausage balloons showed dimly visible against the autumnal sky.

"But if I'd had the pluck of a mouse," he said at last, "I'd have gone long ago to Infantry—and long ago I'd have been sleeping in state beneath a Colonel's wooden cross!"

CHAPTER IV

RUMOURS

OUR mess was now composed of the Skipper, Purple Lucas, the four great Army Commanders, whom I have tried lightly to sketch in the preceding chapter, Eiffel Tower, two supernumerary officers and myself, making in all a total of ten. Such a number was not always easy to accommodate in small French villages, and it was generally the custom, when squadrons found their messes grown to an inconveniently large size, to divide up into two messes. But that was a measure to which the gregarious Squadroon was strongly averse and to which it never resorted except in cases of absolute necessity. As long as we could all be together, what did a little overcrowding matter? At worst, when all other grievances failed us, it gave us something to grumble about, and it never failed to remind Dane that other more favoured persons, Colonels, Generals and Staff Officers, were living in luxurious châteaux.

For the time being, however, we were lucky, because our mess-room was large and there were space, crockery, cutlery and even chairs for all. But there was an uneasy feeling in the air that we should

soon be on the move. Orders had gone forth to recall the working party before its days of bondage had been half completed. The Adjutant, preoccupied, walked portentously with transparent mystery on his brow. The Intelligence Officer had been seen half-buried beneath a pile of newly arrived maps. The Colonel had come around and, carelessly, as though in afterthought, had asked questions about iron rations and ammunition. All these things were significant. The Quartermaster, of course, had long ago told us the actual day on which we should move and the actual place we were moving to. He was then, as indeed he nearly always was, right; but he shared the fate of other prophets in their own country. "Another ration rumour!" every one said whenever he lifted for us the veil of the future, and his predictions were forthwith dismissed from our minds as unworthy of serious notice.

One evening the Squadroon were gathered on the village bridge over the Canche taking shot and shot about with a miniature rifle at rats in the stream. They were discussing the coming move.

"Another blinking gap, I suppose," said Jimmie, with an air of resignation.

"What else could it be?" snapped Purple.

"All right, old red-neck, don't be so nappy! We might be going to Italy, Ireland or Palestine—and it wouldn't be the first time, by a long chalk."

Here Dane broke into a jeremiad. His coat was open; he took his hands out of his pockets, put his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat, planted his feet wide apart, shifted his pipe with teeth and tongue into the remotest corner of his mouth, and let himself go.

"It's—it's just like them to go and move us now, when at last we've got every horse beautifully fixed in under cover! The best stabling we've ever had in France!" Before rumours of the move came, Dane stoutly maintained they were the worst stables he'd ever seen. "And here have I been sweating blood for weeks for the blinking horse show—and now it's all a blinking washout! Flint, the new vet., said I had the Troop Competition absolutely sitting. It really is the blinking limit. Gap be blowed! It's not a gap this time of the year; it's just because some General doesn't like his billets and wants a bigger château! I bet that's what it is!"

"I shouldn't wonder if they're not moving us, just to do you out of that Troop prize," said Tubs darkly. He always took a puckish delight in working up Dane.

Dane looked at him suspiciously for a moment—then continued his lamentation, crescendo.

"Oh, *shurrrup* Dano!" said Jimmie, "you're scaring every rat on the country-side with your blinking hot air."

"Never mind, Dano, it's only for life!" said Bill. "The Cavalry always was a travelling circus, and I reckon it never won't be much else."

"St-st-stick it and crib, Dano!" exhorted Eiffel, as he neatly picked off a rat with his small automatic pistol, a weapon with which he had a wizard-like proficiency. Unfortunately, it had been Jimmie's legitimate turn to shoot with the rifle and even as he drew a careful bead, and began to press the trigger, there was a sharp crack by his side and his quarry rolled over dead into the stream.

A terrible uproar immediately arose upon the bridge.

"As this looks much like murder, I think we'll establish an alibi!" drawled the Skipper.

We proceeded to establish same. We walked through the gathering dusk, along narrow country lanes, to the mess of another Squadron, where we accepted the liquid hospitality that was warmly pressed upon us, and exchanged rumours of the coming move. All were agreed that it was another gap scheme; and all took a gloomy view of the situation. We had been on so many gap schemes and none had ever come off. We didn't believe one ever would come off. But we did believe that, sooner or later, we should be caught by the enemy's guns on the cavalry track and annihilated without having fired a single shot.

Declining a hearty invitation to stop to dinner, we started out homewards.

"Those lads do themselves pretty well," I remarked.

"Oh yes," said the Skipper. "They believe, like most people out here, in making the best of a life that's liable to be short. After all, eating and drinking are two of the biggest things in life, that is if you let them grow on you and don't have other strong interests. So eat, drink and be merry while you may, is the motto—and a motto with many points about it too."

"Yes, I know that's the general idea out here," I answered, "and that's why I was so surprised to find that we live so simply and cheaply in our mess."

"You noticed that?" said the Skipper, rather pleased.

"Yes, of course I did," I replied. "I often wondered why."

"Well," said the Skipper, "you remember what I told you about no one being allowed to pay anything

towards their horse's feeds in these days of temporary and democratic officers? Well, it's exactly the same about their own food. If we drank a lot of whisky, liqueurs, and expensive wines, and ate all sorts of expensive delicacies, these fellows couldn't pay their mess bills. It wouldn't be their fault and, at the same time, it would be a ridiculous situation if, during the war, temporary officers who never wished to join the Army at all—except to do their bit for their country—couldn't afford to live in their Regiments. Take two of our youngsters. Both are married. Both are without a penny of private means. Both were promoted for good service in the ranks; both expressly applied for infantry commissions; and both, because of their experience in the cavalry ranks, were posted to Cavalry. It would be hard on them now if they found more than the whole of their pay absorbed in their mess bills, wouldn't it?"

I agreed that it would.

"Of course," he continued, "some Regiments deliberately use this means to get rid of temporary officers. We got young Jenkins that way. He went to the Pink Dragoons. He was a bit sketchy about his 'h's' and his manners generally, so they crowded him out. Then he came up to us and turned out as good a Troop Leader and as cheery and loyal a boy as ever you could wish to find. He was killed at Arras, poor lad. Luckily our Colonel is a thorough sahib and won't have any snobbish rot of that kind with us. In fact, I sometimes think he rather favours the temporary officers in the way of decorations."

"But to return to messing," I said, "don't you find the richer fellows want to live on a more lavish scale?"

"Oh no. Rich living is all a matter of habit. When we're near a big town they can go off and make beds of their gollies to their heart's content if they want to; but, as a matter of fact, they don't much—an occasional blind, of course, usually when we first arrive in the vicinity of the said big town; and then I notice they hardly ever go near it again. Simple living is a habit too, you see, and we have the simple living habit. No one was more fond of their food than I was, till I got smashed up—and now I don't in the least miss the things I can't eat any more—except chocolates, of course. After all, though old Purple does keep the messing down to five francs a day, he does us jolly well on it, in a simple sort of way, and although we only have whisky and port on special occasions, there's always lots of French beer and cheap French wines—things," continued the Skipper with a smile, "that don't tempt to any great excess. I'm sure," he went on, "it adds a lot to the happiness and efficiency of some of our lads not to be worried about big mess bills and money matters generally."

We now drew near home. As we approached the mess confused sounds of shouting and scuffling, sounds so loud and violent that they almost drowned the insistent notes of the gramophone, emanated from the dining-room.

"Sounds as though they're still scragging old Eiffel for poaching that rat!" I said.

"Sounds like it," said the Skipper. "Let's join in!"

We entered. A seething mass of humanity rocked and heaved in a far corner of the room. Every chair in the vicinity was upset and the mess table was in imminent danger of following suit; but Tubs, not

Eiffel, was the storm centre of the maëlstrom. In spite of his valiant resistance and his well-directed blows of fist and foot, which laid some of his assailants temporarily writhing on the floor, he was at last overpowered. His head was pulled guillotine-wise over the back of a chair and the distinct roll of flesh between his hair and collar was vigorously scrubbed with a brush.

"Come on, Padre," they shouted, "lend a hand! We're hardening his neck!"

It was thought in the Squadroon that Tubs was a shade too sensitive, that he worried over trifles and took things unnecessarily to heart. So in times of slackness we often applied ourselves, entirely for his own good, to this process of hardening his neck.

On the other hand, it was thought in the Squadroon that Purple's neck erred a trifle on the side of hardness. Consequently a converse process of softening his neck with margarine was sometimes attempted; but never with any great success.

When the good work had been well and thoroughly carried out and the room restored to some semblance of order, Purple called the Skipper's attention to a pile of papers on the table.

"That little lot's arrived while you were away!"

The Skipper glanced rapidly at each paper, handing most of them on to Purple with a chuckle of relief and the remark "Q Branch!" Presently he paused and read one slowly and carefully through.

"Hullo, chaps!" he said. We were all "chaps" since a book had been seen in the mess called "Soldier Chaps." "This morning at dawn the British Army broke through the enemy's front between Auxi and St. Pol!"

"Funny," said Jimmie thoughtfully. "I was in St. Poll to-day and I never noticed it there!"

"Ha, ha, funny ass!" shouted the others, and a spirited interchange of personal remarks raged for some moments, in which Jimmie more than held his own.

"Go on, Skipper," said Dane, when comparative quiet reigned again. "Is it the scheme for to-morrow's Regimental Staff Ride?"

"It is, no less," said the Skipper. "After a certain amount of chat about Berlin, Paris, and London, it boils down to our rendezvousing with field-glass—field-glasses, mark you, *not* empty cases!—at Regimental Headquarters at 9.30 and doing an Advanced Guard on a two-Troop front in pursuit of a beaten enemy towards Flers and consolidating on the last bound. Here's a copy of the general and special ideas for each of you. Who's got a map? Let's decide what Napoleon would have did under the circs."

They got out their maps and soon all were engaged in working out the proposition. Argument and discussion were loud and long continued, till after about an hour the mess had divided broadly and about equally into two schools of thought. In each school there were differences of opinion about minor details, such as the direction and the action of certain patrols, but on the main principles there was perfect accord. But the two great schools differed irreconcilably on an important point of the bounds. All through dinner the question was debated with ever-growing force and liveliness. Eiffel had received by that day's mail a paternal gift of two bottles of the choicest whisky, which mellow spirit stimulated our tactical

imagination and increased miraculously our powers of eloquence.

After the meal, when all were holding forth together and none listening, the Skipper and I pulled up our chairs to the fire and lit our pipes. I found myself quite looking forward to the morrow, to seeing the scheme actually carried out on the ground, and to hearing the official verdict of the correct solution.

"Wonderful how chatty a little drop of booze makes us all!" said the Skipper, as the voices at the table rose louder and louder.

During the war I had lived in many messes and in most of them there had been a rigid rule of etiquette that no military shop should be talked at meals. Seeing that the Skipper felt chatty himself, I now laughingly reminded him of this rule and remarked, by way of drawing him out, that it did not seem to hold good in his mess.

"Yes," he said, "that was a pre-war rule. If you talked shop or mentioned a lady's name in mess, you were fined a glass of port all round. The latter, of course, was an excellent rule. Some ass might easily start off making the most unflattering remarks about some woman in the garrison, while all the time the fellow sitting next to him might be madly in love with her. But I always did think the talking shop rule damn silly—especially out here. For, after all, the war is the one great vital thing. If you're going laboriously to pose as taking no interest in it, and if you refuse to talk about your job in it except on parade, well, it's going to make life out here utterly boresome. Besides, their own job is the only thing these young savages really do know something about and can talk about. Personally, I encourage them to talk shop at all times.

Schemes and manœuvres can be extraordinarily good if you take them as a game. And that's what we do. We always work out these schemes among ourselves beforehand and have small bets with each other on what the official solution will be. It makes the whole show awfully interesting."

He puffed thoughtfully at his pipe for a few moments and then went on again.

"It's wonderful how much these boys know, compared to what we used to know at their age. Leading a Troop is the hardest job in the Army. You've got to read your map, grasp the lie of the country, foresee every eventuality, and think coolly at fifteen miles an hour. And, to do that, you've got to be a perfect horseman on a perfectly trained horse. The reason of fellows failing as Troop Leaders in the field is very often because they are bad riders on untrained horses, or because they've spoiled their chargers racing them."

"But how is it they know more than you fellows did when you were their age?" I inquired. "I thought you had a very thorough and much longer grounding at Sandhurst in those days?"

"So we did. But there we gaily handled Divisions and Army Corps—on paper, of course—which was excellent for enlarging the horizon; but when we joined our Regiments and had to tell off points and patrols and things, we hadn't the foggiest idea how to do it. No, it's the Divisional Schools out here that have taught all these yougsters so much and taught them all to work on the same lines. A boy goes off there and finds himself in a mess with ten or a dozen other cheery lads from other Regiments in the Division. That makes for an interchange of ideas and opens up his

mind no end to start with. All the morning they go out, mounted, on some scheme. Sometimes they're patrol leaders, sometimes troop leaders, sometimes squadron leaders. As each situation occurs, each lad has to give his solution of it verbally, and to repeat exactly the orders he would give. Nothing vague allowed like, 'Oh, I'd send a couple of men around that side of the village and another couple around the other side, and I'd shove along and meet them a quarter of a mile more or less beyond it.' 'Here are your two men,' says the Instructor, pointing to two other officers of the class. 'Now give them their actual orders word for word, short, clear, and definite—then ask them if they understand exactly what they've got to do.' They gallop hell's bells from one situation to another, to get into the habit of thinking while moving fast, they cover an immense amount of ground, and they come home to lunch as hungry as hawks. They have the afternoons to themselves, which they usually spend arguing the point or doing a bit of quiet poaching. After tea they have a lecture, and after the lecture the Instructor runs through the following day's scheme with them for twenty minutes or half an hour. That's all. Work not overdone, practically no writing and run on the lines of an interesting joy ride. Old man as I am, I think my month there was one of the cheeriest and most instructive I've ever had. I was positively amazed to find out my own ignorance of the most elementary things; and I met all sorts of right fellows there I'd never seen before. No one who isn't an utter rotter could help learning a lot there and, as I said before, the great thing is that we all learnt to work on the same lines. Yes," he proceeded reflectively, "that 'no talking shop' and rot of that kind is as dead as

mutton. This old war has changed everything, even knocked the bottom out of many of the old cast-iron military traditions. There's going to be a hard time ahead for the old lot, who'll fight tooth and nail to get things back on the old footing. But they'll be swept away by the great new forces of knowledge, brought about by the whole nation having been in arms. The only dignified procedure is to recognize these changes and meet them half-way. Give graciously before being made to give—otherwise the deluge!"

Two bottles of whisky among ten is not a very large amount. Inspiration flagged, the divine fires of eloquence began to flicker out. One by one the great tacticians left the table and joined the circle around the fire. Only Dane and Tubs kept their seats and maintained the argument. Dane had, with great foresight and adroitness, secured our only teetotaller's share of the dishlishious whisky, as well as his own, and when thus primed he became a veritable demagogue. He thumped the table with his fist, he poured out floods of destructive criticism, verging almost on invective, and he expressed his scorn of those who did not agree with his views in the plainest terms. Whenever he showed any signs of flagging, Tubs spurred him on to further efforts by some provocative question, ingenuously worded and spoken in tones of innocent and child-like inquiry.

While at the height of one of his flights of declamation, to which no one except Tubs was listening, a diversion occurred. Frank entered the room. Frank was our cycle orderly. He was very fair, strong featured, fresh faced, aggressively neat and very young. His demeanour was exceedingly sedate and prim, and his

speech was filled with very long words. Before joining up he had been in the Admiralty. Whether he was First Sea Lord or Second Landlord we didn't rightly know. Indeed we were inclined to think his actual office had been something more junior, something even quite obscure; but we knew that, whatever his nominal position, he was the unseen power behind the throne. War had found our Navy mobilized and on the seas, and we of the Squadroon were certain that that great master-stroke of strategy was the work of Frank and of Frank alone. Under no circumstances did he ever show any emotion. He was indifferent alike to heat and cold, to pain and pleasure, to danger and to safety. He was deeply sensible of the gravity of life, he never smiled, and he hated the war; but his manifold duties he carried out with the minutest exactitude, and all those perplexing little problems with which the life of a cycle orderly is so plentifully beset he easily and airily solved as though with the supreme wisdom of a superior intelligence. The Skipper declared that he never dreamed of taking an important step without first consulting Frank; and it was believed that, on one critical occasion in open warfare, when he had arrived with orders at about 4 a.m. and it had been impossible to wake the Skipper, who was slightly gassed and utterly exhausted, Frank himself had made out the dispositions for the successful battle of the morrow.

Once an attempt had been made to promote him, but this movement he had very respectfully and very sternly suppressed in the embryo.

He now handed the Skipper a message form.

"From the Adjutant, sir."

The Skipper read it through.

"Thank you, Benson," he said. "Would you ask the Sergeant-Major to come here?"

"Certainly, sir." And Frank walked sedately out of the room.

Every one looked anxious and expectant.

"Saddle out and turn up," said the Skipper.

"What! to-night?" came a chorus of misery and indignation.

The Skipper enjoyed the general consternation for a few moments before answering.

"No, nine o'clock to-morrow."

"That's worse!" said Dane.

"C'est la guerre," said Bill.

A grievous lamentation now broke out, directed especially against the Staff. "Why couldn't they have let us know before? All the men are down to it now. Can't get anything done to-night, and there won't be time to-morrow. Oh, we're a rag-time Army!"

"Oh yes, there'll be lots of time to-morrow to do everything," said the Skipper. "Fact is we've been sitting on our hunkers thousands of miles back behind the line for so long that you've all become a lot of pot-bellied conscientious objectors."

"But we must have our moan, Skipper," said Tubs.

The Skipper laughed.

"Well, you've had it now. Listen, here's the book of the words. 'The Regiment will move to the vicinity of St. Pol to-morrow, via Villiers Blanc and Bonneux, distance 16 miles. Head of the column will pass Ferm du Bois at 9.30 a.m. Order of march—Regimental Headquarters, B, D and C Squadrons. Here," turning to Purple, "is a special message for

you, dearie! 'Billeting parties will meet the Second-in-Command at Regimental Headquarters at 7.30 a.m.'" Grunt of disgust from Purple. "'Each Squadron will leave behind a clearing-up party and an officer to settle claims in its respective area.' Well, that's that. Now we know how we're fixed. Brekker at seven. That'll give our servants time to get our kits packed and loaded on the waggon—and leave time to get the mess things packed—as well as giving us a chance of kissing Purple good morning before he starts."

Tubs, on account of his good French and his insinuating manner with the natives, was detailed to remain behind and parley with M. le Maire over the claims. I noticed he did not seem pleased or flattered. In fact every one was glum and peevish. Corkran, paragon of mess waiters, cleared the table with patient suffering written largely on his brow and with an air more of sorrow than of anger.

"It's always like this when we've been a long time in the same billets," said the Skipper. "The first march is the very devil. If you don't watch it they leave their ammunition and every damn thing behind. But after a day or two the change is wonderful. You'll see for yourself."

There was a discreet knock, and William Henry entered. A chair was placed for him and he accepted a glass of wine. His expression plainly denoted that he was consciously and bravely making the best of what he considered a very bad job. Without actually putting it into words, he conveyed the impression that he, too, felt this sudden move was an unpardonable affront and that, though it was not his place to say so, he was far from satisfied with our Army system.

Also, he was not very fond of *vin rouge*, but he did like whisky, and he saw the two bottles standing hopelessly empty on the table. He sighed bravely.

"Well, Sergeant-Major," said the Skipper, "I suppose we shall have to dump the band instruments and all that canteen and recreation room furniture you took so much trouble in fixing up?"

"I'm afraid so, sir, and every time we dump the instruments half of them get smashed. But it can't be helped, sir. I think I may be able to sell the tables and forms to the civvies at a decent price."

They settled eventually what was to be taken and what left behind, and the Skipper gave his orders for the march.

"Ferm du Bois—not more than ten minutes from here. I think perhaps, though, we'd better leave half an hour and parade at nine to-morrow, what?"

William Henry smiled.

"Yes, sir, I think it would be as well to leave plenty of time to-morrow."

"Right-ho! Squadron parade nine o'clock. What's the order of Troops?"

"Second Troop's turn to lead, sir; then it would be easiest for the others to follow in the order that their billets are nearest to the rendezvous, that is, 4th, 1st 3rd——"

"All right. Squadron parade on the road just beyond 2nd Troop billet. Tell off the clearing-up party."

"Yes, sir, I've done that. Sergeant Middleton in charge. He's got a map and can read it—he won't be wandering around the country for the next week trying to find us again!"

There was a general smile at this allusion to the

misfortunes of another Sergeant who, some months before, had been left behind in charge of the clearing-up party and who, owing to the British pronunciation of a French name, involuntarily did the grand tour of northern France before we saw him again.

"Mr. Lucas is detailing the billeting party himself. That's all then, I think, Sergeant-Major?"

"That's all, sir."

"Right-ho. Good night, Sergeant-Major."

"Good night, Sergeant-Major," echoed all the mess.

William Henry, saluting with intense smartness and a lingering Guards-like tremor of the hand, bade us good night and departed.

We continued to sit around the fire discussing the situation for half an hour or so.

"I hope it won't be another Arras," said Bill. "That was a proper twister, that was."

All agreed and fell into melancholy reminiscence. Eiffel was a man of strange and unusual gifts. Taking advantage of the momentary silence he now exercised that one in which he was most uncannily perfect. From his chair on the outer edge of the circle, away in the shadows, he rendered the flight, descent and bursting of a crump. The imitation was so sudden and so startlingly realistic, that many of us ducked hastily. When we had recovered our nerve, Eiffel, for the second time that evening, hardly escaped with his life.

"How often have I told you," said the Skipper, sternly addressing the mangled remains, "that no gentleman ever makes noises like that among other gentlemen?"

"S-s-s-sorry, Skipper," said the bedraggled but

impenitent Eiffel, crooning softly to himself at the success of his performance.

But, in spite of occasional references to previous gaps and this foretaste of a barrage, I noticed that they were chiefly preoccupied with a sense of grievance at having to leave their comfortable billets, on which they had expended so much pains. The prospect of what the next few days might bring forth had as yet only a very dim and distant place in their minds.

I walked thoughtfully to my room that night through the little sleeping country village. Up above the stars shone serenely out between an archipelago of fleecy clouds. No faint booming disturbed the stillness, no flickerings, as of summer lightning, played over the distant sky. All was the essence of peace. For a time I lay awake in my comfortable bed. In two, three, or four days where should I be? What would be my setting? What awful things would I have seen? What ghastly thing might I myself be? A cold shiver ran down my spine. For some miserable moments I was the prey of abject fear, shaken by a nameless dread of the unknown. Then the fit passed and there came another thrill, a very faint thrill of excitement—the glamour and fascination of the great adventure.

CHAPTER V

DAY MARCHING

THE following morning I awoke at a most immoral hour. My waking thoughts were filled with a vague sense of something big about to happen, with the consciousness that something was troubling my mind, something exciting and not altogether pleasant. But, of what that something was, no recollection seemed to come. Sounds of unusual movement and of heavy breathing pervaded all the room. I half opened my eyes and saw, by the faint light of a single candle, that old Grampus was busily packing my valise. Then I remembered. We were moving; a gap; battle-fighting; brekker at seven!

Now nothing is so unpleasant as leaving things to the last moment, and then being feverishly rushed and hustled. On the other hand, nothing is so pleasant as turning over again and dozing for a few minutes or an hour after being called on a dark and chilly morning. Most of life's misery lies in the eternal conflict between these two powerful motives. Knowing well from long experience that he who turns over, or stops to think about it, is lost, I leaped straightway from the warm and downy comfort of my bed, dressed with as much speed as my numbing

fingers would allow, and walked briskly over to the mess. That weakness of the night before had quite passed from me. I felt now only pleasant anticipations of much movement, new experiences and stirring scenes; pleasant anticipations of a long and entertaining picnic in delightful company, and, above all, the pride that I myself, in the hour of trial—still mercifully distant—would be one of the chosen champions of St. George and Merrie England.

The Skipper, Bill and I arrived simultaneously at the mess. Dane, always the earliest riser, was already there, smoking his second pre-breakfast pipe—the first was invariably smoked in bed. He was in excellent spirits.

"It's a glorious life, a soldier of the King!" he exclaimed, beaming largely, and for a moment there was a danger that he might have broken into song. Strong as we always were, even under the inhuman circumstance of a breakfast by lamplight, there were limits even to the fortitude of the Squadroon. The danger was quickly foreseen, vigorous action was instantly taken, and the horrible menace never materialized. But the escape had been narrow.

The clock in the tower of the little church across the road chimed out the hour of six. The pious peasantry of Picardy had resisted with calm and quiet obstinacy this sacrilegious innovation of daylight saving and of summer time. Le Bon Dieu, who made the great big yellow sun, surely knew His own business better than those thieving rascals of the Government; and who were they to go against the laws of Nature and of God? *Mais non, mais non!*

Seven o'clock: the table was invitingly laid, but no savoury dishes began to appear from the kitchen,

We sat down hopefully. One by one the others came in and passed the morning salutation, "B'jour, m'sieus!" the last syllable uttered high and staccato, and pronounced "tsup" in imitation of the accents of Picardy. Purple arrived, redly blue about the gills, and much pressed for time, as he had only twenty minutes before starting. He was very hungry; he always was very hungry, and he sat down and weaved horribly. Dane lifted up his voice and shouted "Corkran!" in stentorian tones; but there was no response. Corkran, paragon of mess waiters, had one failing. He was a truly great man, he had the profile of a Roman patrician, he had a mind of great refinement, he spoke in the soft persuasive accents of a diplomat, he was the finest all-round athlete in the Regiment, he spoke English-French with copious fluency, he was a highly-finished squire of dames, but he had one failing, one grave failing. He could not, or he would not, get up early in the morning. In the field it was different; there he never failed; but in billets, I write it with pain, he did not rise to these inauspicious occasions.

"Try Brown," some one suggested.

Brown was our mess cook. Again Dane lifted up his voice and bellowed mightily; again with no response.

The Skipper jerked his head towards Purple.

"I'm afraid we shall have to ask him, Dano?" he said gravely.

"I'm afraid so," replied Dane.

"Eh, Bill?"

"Ay, there's nothing else for it."

"Oh, help!" groaned Jimmie, edging his chair away from Purple.

The Skipper smote Purple on the back.

"Go on, you great brazen-throated brute," he said, and quickly put his fingers in his ears. The rest of us quickly followed suit, or else gripped on to the table with both hands. Without any preliminary indrawing of the breath, without any apparent effort, Purple emitted a terrific roar of leonine intensity and penetration.

"BROW-N-N-N!"

From the wood on the distant hillside a dense flock of rooks rose up and flighted swiftly southwards. An ominous tremor ran through the heavy chandelier over our heads. A small china vase fell off the mantelpiece and crashed tinkling into pieces on the floor. The door flung open, and Brown, wild-eyed and dishevelled, rushed in in his shirt-sleeves.

"You called, sir?"

"Breakfast!" snapped Purple.

"Coming up, sir."

A moment later Frank appeared, spic span and sedate, bearing steaming plates which exhaled the most appetizing odours. It was not in Frank's province to wait at mess, and there was that in the added primness of his face which showed plainly that he knew full well that he was saving an awkward situation. But if any shadowy feeling of joy ever touched that adamantine heart, if any faint emotion of satisfaction ever ruffled the stern composure of his mind, it was on occasions such as this, when he rose conspicuously superior to human vanity and to human weakness.

"What a delicious smell of barkoon," said the Skipper, sniffing appreciatively. "Er—Benson!"

"No, Skipper, no, you don't," said Dane.

"Be strong, Skipper!" exhorted the others in chorus.

"Benson, one lightly boiled egg for the Captain," said Purple conclusively.

"Very good, sir."

The Skipper did not look altogether grateful at being thus saved from himself.

"Never mind," he said, "we'll soon be out of the reach of diet, and then I'll have a perfect orgy of bully and biscuit. I love bully and biscuit—that is for a day or two, of course, till my mouth begins to bleed and my teeth to splinter off."

Breakfast was soon over. Corkran appeared, looking slightly sheepish, and the least thing dissipated, and began to pack the mess basket and the food pack. Various articles, such as books, tins of tobacco, boxes of cigarettes, torches, spare maps, which ought to have been packed in our own kits, were discovered lying about odd corners of the mess. With exclamations of annoyance and apology their owners pressed them upon Corkran, who, in some miraculous manner, managed to make room for them all, as well as for its legitimate contents, in the mess basket.

Grumbling horridly at the Christmas-tree effect, the warriors now girded their armour on—haversack, revolver, ammunition pouch, wire cutters, glasses, map case, all uncomfortable, nobbly things, topped by the crowning misery of a tin hat and a strangling gaspirator.

Soon the Skipper and I alone sat smoking before the fire in the mess, which, denuded of all our familiar goods and chattels, seemed strangely inhospitable and almost even hostile. "I suffered you civilly while I

had to," it seemed to say, "but now that you are going I will not try to pretend that I am not heartily glad." With a rumbling sound the waggon drew up in front of the door. Glad of an excuse to leave the mess we went out to watch the kits being loaded on to it. It was drawn by a perfect team of four dark-brown, glossy horses, which were the pride of the Squadroon and the darlings of the driver's heart. All the steel-work of the harness shone like burnished silver, and the rich dark leather glowed with the polish of a mirror. It is a notable fact in France that the equipment of transport is usually kept in a highly satisfactory state of cleanliness. It would be pleasant to believe that the reason of this cleanliness sprang from the Englishman's proper pride in his turn-out and himself. Perhaps in part it does; but there is another reason too. No one really likes running into great danger, and those who can, with a clear conscience, avoid it, generally prefer to do so. A second-line transport driver never approaches danger. When his unit draws near the battle zone, the transport is parked in some place far away behind, out of the sound of guns and the reach of shells. If, therefore, the driver be a man who loves his life and loves his wife and loves his lager beer, the worst punishment that can befall him is dismission from his waggon and return to duty. So it follows, not metaphorically, but in grim and sober earnest, that he waters and feeds, polishes and burnishes, as though his life depended upon it.

Perched up on the driver's seat was Gertrude Bloggs, the Squadroon dog, a shaggy-haired, nondescript little person, with a coat of silvery grey. She now surveyed with wondrous pride the latest of her

many proofs of the Entente, a flourishing month-old family of pekineese, lurchers and mastiffs that clustered thickly around her. Our belongings were quickly hoisted on board, and the waggon moved off to its appointed rendezvous.

It was now nine o'clock.

"I'd better give 'em another five minutes," said the Skipper, "sure to be some untoward incidents this morning. Let's say good-bye to the old trout in here."

In the best French that we could command, we bade our adieux to our hostess of the mess. She gave us a cold, limp hand to shake, and in accents just as cold and spiritless, she mechanically wished us luck and a safe return. A cold shiver ran down my back as I wondered how often before she had spoken those same toneless, unfelt words to men who had been going up to death and mutilation, and how little she would have cared, did she ever know. After all, why should she care? All human love is very narrow, very shallow, very selfish. And what were we to her, but a lot of rough and noisy young foreigners, who often kept her awake until all hours of the night with our everlasting din and racket? "Au 'voir, Madame, au 'voir, and a thousand thanks for all your kindness."

"Now then, to 'orse, to 'orse!" said the Skipper, "our quads will be waiting at the head of the Squadroon."

We walked to the rendezvous. The Squadroon was formed up in line on the right-hand side of the road, with the horses' heads facing inwards. As we approached, Eiffel, on whom had fallen the mantle of the absent Purple, called the parade to attention, and, followed by William Henry, came forward a few steps

to meet us, saluted and reported the numbers present. Beginning thus at the rear, the Skipper, rapidly looking around each horse and man, worked his way up to the head of the Squadroon. He looked only to see that the saddlery was properly fitted, and that each man had taken his rifle out of the bucket: for spit and polish he cared very little indeed. But not so William Henry. Himself scintillating with dazzling lustre, stiff with snowiest pipe-clay, he shot keen, fierce glances of his eagle eye over the saddle and bridle, belt and spur. And as we progressed up the line his brows lowered, and his glances grew darker and more fierce. Even to my untutored eye it was evident that the turn-out was not quite all that it might have been; and I knew that the Skipper would be very respectfully, very firmly, and very severely spoken to on the subject by William Henry.

Arthur Jenner, who had risen from M.G.G.S. to First Army Commander, vice Tubs left behind to settle claims, wore the stern, set expression of a man who had just come through a searching ordeal; but all his Troop was present and correct. Jimmie, whose keen, eager little face was also set in stern hard lines from recent tribulation, was still two men short. Dane's army was all present, but he himself was strangely hoarse, almost inaudible, and the pallor of his countenance told plainer than any words what pains he had had to bear.

Just before the inspection was finished, Jimmie's two men arrived with a great clatter, at full gallop, whereupon shouts of execration arose from all in authority. A moment latter another clatter proclaimed the advent of Corkran and Brown, the former leading a white pony on which was that most precious of

burdens, the officers' food pack. The Skipper blew his whistle and made the signal to mount. "Get mounted, get mounted!" was passed all the way down the line. The proper word, of course, was "mount," but the soldier, who is not always economical of words, invariably prefers to put himself to the trouble of uttering those three syllables rather than the one.

"Half Sections right, walk march! March at ease!" And the Squadroon started off at a dignified pace up the hill, towards the Ferme du Bois. A few children and one or two of the younger women, coiffed with a taste and neatness which, in that class, is uniquely French, stood at their doorways waving farewell to those cavaliers who had been their especial friends. But the village in general made no demonstration of sorrow at our departure.

Eiffel, in virtue of his office as Second-in-Command, rode behind, shepherding the rear—an unenviable position, not only because of the frequent necessity of stopping to assist and exhort such as fell out by the wayside, but also because of the continual checking and concertina-ing which inevitably occurs in the rear of the shortest mounted column. The Skipper, Dane, and I rode along together, followed by William Henry and the Trumpeter, followed by the head of the Second Army.

Although his voice had given out, Dane's temper was still at fever heat. We gathered from his hoarse whisper that it had been a work of supreme difficulty to get the Second Army on to parade at the proper hour.

"I don't know what the blinky blink they think they teach 'em at the Reserve Regiment," said he, "but that draft that came up last week can't blinking

well pack their saddles, or even saddle up their horses. A more blinky useless lot of blink blinks I've never seen in all my blinking life!"

"We're dealing with men, Dano, not supermen. You teach 'em their job, and they'll be all right," said the Skipper. Then he turned to me. "If I were to take any one of these useless blink blinks from Dano for another Troop, or for the echelon or anything, he'd raise a howl like a mother bereft of her only cheeild—isn't that so, Dano?"

Dane's answer was inaudible.

After about ten minutes at the walk, rounding a bend of the road, we came upon the tail of "D" Squadron, halted and dismounted. Owing to another bend a few yards further on, we could only see about one Troop of what was now a column of considerable length. We, too, halted, turned half-sections left, dismounted, and looked around our horses, each Army Commander coming up to report the correctness or otherwise of his command, after having himself received the reports of his Section Leaders.

It wanted only a few minutes to nine-thirty. The Regimental Sergeant-Major, in military circles a very great personage indeed, came trotting up. He was not as other "Regimentals" are: he had not the roaring, slightly husky voice, or the harshly despotic manner. His face was gentle, and except in battle—where he was bloody-minded beyond all description—his disposition was singularly mild. He saluted the Skipper with a pleasant smile.

"Are you all up, sir?"

"Yes, all up, Mr. Masterman."

And he trotted away again, around the bend and out of sight. A few minutes later we heard the order

coming down the column, "Get mounted!" and again we started off, this time as a complete Regiment.

Presently we came out of our winding country lane on to one of the endlessly straight poplar-lined roads of Picardy. We now took up the distances between units as laid down in standing orders, that is to say, two hundred yards between each Squadron and twenty-five between each Troop. The country in those parts is a continuous succession of parallel ridges, divided by steep, broad valleys in between; and consequently our march was much in the nature of a switchback, down one ridge, across the valley, up the next, down again, and so on, and so on. As we crested one ridge we could see, each at their ordered distances, the other two Squadrons on the slopes and in the valley below, and the blue and primrose pennon of R.H.Q. bravely fluttering on the top of the next ridge, nearly three-quarters of a mile ahead. The length of space taken up on the road by a single Regiment, when thus seen with our own eyes, gave us a vivid idea of the length and unwieldiness of a whole Division, or even of a Brigade, when, as sometimes happened, all its units had to move by the same road.

As we rode along, a continual stream of men belonging to R.H.Q. and the two Squadrons in front, trotted or galloped past us in the frantic endeavour to catch up their own particular units. This sad spectacle greatly pleased both the Skipper and Dane. The drill books attempt to encourage a spirit of friendly rivalry between all junior commanders; but in these two this spirit had run somewhat to excess. Neither could bear to think that any other Squadron, or any other Troop, ever did anything better than his own. Both were

still smarting, in their different ways, under the humiliation of the morning's dirty and dilatory turn-out; and now the open shame of the other Squadrons came as soothing balm to their wounded feelings.

"Keep to yer right! Keep to yer right!" Four galloping men and a pack pony cannoned off a lorry into our leading Section; then, followed by a torrent of abuse, hurried on after the Squadron ahead.

"Anyway *we* were all at the rendezvous up to time," said the Skipper, gazing after the belated soldiery with ill-concealed satisfaction.

"That Squadron always were a blinking awful rabble," replied Dane with great gusto, his ill-humour rapidly evaporating.

Presently, far away and faint, from the head of the Regiment, came the sound of a trumpet-call. It was repeated by each Squadron in turn, and the column began to trot. Now the first trot in any march is a sorry period of dissolution. It finds out all the weak spots. The trot never forgives. And this was the first trot in the first march for many months. Soon the roadside was littered with a melancholy and blasphemous crowd, dealing with saddles that had turned, packs that had fallen off, blankets that had slipped, puttees that had come undone, shoes that had been cast, straps that had broken; in short, with all the innumerable ills and misfortunes that can possibly befall the horse, his harness and his rider.

"Looks like a blinking battlefield!" remarked Dane.

It was a tactless question, I know, but curiosity is my besetting sin, and I could not help asking it.

"Does this—er—this sort of thing happen in all Regiments?"

"Good Lord, yes, of course it does," said the Skipper shortly. "Wait till we're rear Regiment of the Brigade, and you'll see for yourself."

"I suppose they're not falling out of our Squadron anything like as much?"

He laughed.

"What the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve for! I'd like to think they weren't, but I'm afraid if we ask Eiffel he'll have a shocking tale of woe to tell us. There's always bound to be a certain amount of it, you know—horses that blow themselves out when they're being girthed up, perished leather, and so on."

After a few minutes the trumpets again sounded, the disastrous trot came to an end, and we halted, dismounted, and licked our sores.

The joints in our armour having now been mercilessly exposed, they were rapidly repaired, and the march was resumed without further misadventure. After some miles we halted again upon the crest of a high ridge, which commanded an extensive view of all the country around about. On our left, upon three converging roads, which conjoined with ours about half a-mile ahead, we saw three other mounted columns, moving at the walk. On our right, on a similarly converging road, we saw a fourth and shorter column. These were the other two Regiments, the Battery and the Machine Gun Squadron of our Brigade. Apparently we had halted to allow them to precede us on our road, and it seemed as though our halt would be of by no means short duration.

Nothing is more wearisome and more annoying than unnecessary checks and long loiterings on the

march. At home when things go wrong we abuse the Government. The Government does not answer us back; we have the wordy warfare all our own way, and our minds are most wonderfully eased. Similarly in France, when things go wrong, we relieve our overcharged feelings by abusing the Staff. And this was clearly a favourable opportunity for that popular form of recreation.

"At it again!" growled Dane, "the good old game of divisional criss-cross! We never do a march in this blinking Division without every Brigade crossing the others at least twice, and every Regiment crossing every other Regiment in the Brigade at least four times. Good old Staff! They go in their cars, and they say, 'Blink you, we're all right!' and they don't give a damn if we spend the whole blinking day on the roadside—and then they come and nag us because our horses are thin! They ought to find out who's responsible for this shemozzle and blinking well shoot the blinker as an example to the others."

The Skipper had been looking at the converging columns through his glasses.

"Yes, they're mostly a lazy, rotten, useless lot of blighters, but I don't think it's the Staff this time," he said reluctantly. "Those cross-roads on there are obviously the Brigade rendezvous. We're probably a few minutes before our time."

This was indeed the case. Presently two of the other columns began to trot; then we mounted and followed, while the remaining two columns waited to follow on behind us.

So small a formation as the Squadroon did not as a rule receive detailed orders of anything higher than the Regiment. Many movements that we had to

make, many movements that we saw others making, seemed to us, therefore, strangely unsound and unreasonable, simply because we were quite in the dark as to their cause or purpose. And on such occasions our great solace was this severe censure of the Staff.

That little incident of the Brigade rendezvous, however, taught me a lesson in the folly of hasty judgment, which I have not yet forgotten; and it also opened up for me a new and very wide field of interest in all our subsequent marches and movements. In our orders we were given only our Regimental rendezvous. Henceforward it amused me to work out on the map with the Skipper the various routes of other Regiments, the various rendezvous, watering places, the locations of the different H.Q. at our destination, and, in short, by putting ourselves in the Divisional Commander's place, to piece together those orders of higher formations which we had not had the privilege of seeing. We were usually wrong in most respects, because all movements are governed by certain factors such as supplies, other traffic on the road, intent to mislead the enemy's air scouts, and other innumerable factors of which we naturally had no knowledge whatever. But the speculation amused us and helped greatly to enliven the monotony of a march, and to shorten the length of the road.

As we in turn approached the cross-roads, we perceived a solitary figure, mounted upon a white pony, watching the column go by.

"Hullo," said the Skipper, "there's the Old Man!" and he called the Squadroon to attention.

The Brigadier saluted.

"March at ease, please!" he said, and made some genial remark to each officer as he passed.

"The Old Man's in great heart this morning," said the Skipper, "he's apt to be a bit nappy sometimes of a cold and frosty morning."

I wonder if he knew that he was called the "Old Man," and how he would like it if he did know; for in spite of his seniority there was not a boy in his Brigade more athletic than himself, nor any with a younger and more human heart. We didn't really know much about generals, but we felt that our Old Man was different from other generals. When he had to give a decision, there was no beating about the bush, no havering: it was definite and final; and we knew exactly where we were. He liked, too, to see for himself how things stood, even though this curiosity entailed visiting unpleasant and unhealthy places. The white pony with its short, thick-set rider in the khaki-covered helmet, was seen calmly walking down the line in Bourlon Wood, and, in later days, galloping with the leading Troop of the advanced Squadron from Warvilliers to Ruvroy. These perhaps are small things, but they make a deep impression on the fighting animal; and whenever we met the Old Man, there was that "something more" in our salute that can never be taught upon the barrack square.

The Old Man stood at the cross-roads and watched the column pass. This morning he was infectiously bright and cheerful. In course of time I learned that senior officers always did appear cheerful as we drew nearer to the battle. It was part of the system of *moral;* one of the heavy burdens of rank. For although the face be all smiles, and the voice full of laughter, no one can see his own, his very own, command pass before him on the eve of battle without a great sadness and a great pity in his heart.

Presently we turned into the great high road that runs through St. Pol to the sea. This, too, was straight, interminably straight, lined with the inevitable poplars, and treated in the middle with composition. It was what is technically known, I believe, as a "first-class road": that is to say that three separate lines of both-ways traffic moved upon it If, on such a road, a block does occur, either through accident or through "double-banking," it can well be imagined, with such volume of traffic, how rapidly the congestion piles up for miles on either side of the obstruction, until it becomes as solid and immovable as the dam of Assouan. As these blocks cause confusion and delay, sometimes of many hours, sometimes even of days, the traffic control is vigilant and severe. The necessity of what is sometimes a seeming tyranny is so well understood by all that instant obedience is accorded to the uplifted hand of the red-capped sentry —obedience as instant and implicit as to the uplifted hand of the London policeman; which indeed, disguised for the nonce in khaki, these red-caps often are.

Marching along a first-class road is not altogether an unmixed joy. The horseman is incessantly jostled and buffeted off the edge of the road into the trees and ditches by great, bullying lorries, or supercilious, self-important cars, or, worse still, by the puffing, snorting, hooting motor-cycles. As regards the lorry and the car, there is no question: they carry the heavier metal, and the horseman who values his life must give way at once with the best grace he can. But with that lesser fry, that mosquito craft, the motor-cycle, we might try conclusions. We might try to ignore its presence, to proceed straight ahead with contemptuous dignity and leave it to get out of *our*

way. But then we are reckoning without that noble animal the horse. The motor-cycle may be of lighter metal, but it has at its disposal an orchestra of noises so varied and so terrible as to shatter even the strongest of equine nerves. We hear behind us the infernal hooting and tooting, the puffing and chuffing, the penetrating blast of the klaxon. We hear a great and ever-approaching commotion, and much blasphemy in the ranks. The cry comes up the column, "Keep t'yer right, keep t'yer right!" But there is room on our left for the indecency to pass between us and the line of lorries. We ride straight on, back slightly stiffened, head slightly raised, showing a hauteur suitable to the occasion, and heeding neither the hoots nor the toots, nor the repeated injunction to keep to our right. The loud-voiced beast is almost upon us. We smell his fœtid breath; and still our gallant charger calmly and disdainfully holds his even course. But the enemy is not at the end of his resources. Nothing but the whole road will content him; he comes alongside; he swings in his tail; he fires a succession of reports, like a machine-gun, only far louder and more terrible. Tongues of fire near our flanks, clouds of evil-smelling smoke compass us about. The horse is a noble animal; he is the friend of man. But there are limits even to his nobility and friendship. Our frenzied steed plunges wildly into the blue—and we are lucky if we maintain our seat, and further, if we can get him to walk quietly again during the remainder of that march.

Although marching on a first-class road is not without drawbacks, it has compensations too. One anxious, watchful eye we have to keep, so to speak, on our own unworthy skins, but the other is hugely

entertained by the passing pageantry of modern war. This great road is one of the main arteries of Britain's blood and iron. Very little blood do we see upon it, but vast quantities of every form of iron. We forget the vexations of the morning, we forget even that we are started on a gap scheme as we watch the ceaseless streams of traffic flowing by. Great lorries thunder along, bearing the well-known signs of famous divisions, and loaded with every imaginable kind of material, from foot soldiers to wooden crosses, from building material to heavy shells, from W.A.A.C.'s caps to Australian ground sheets, from man's food to rats' poison. A pontoon train of life-sized barges on wheels lumbers up the middle of the road with an elephantine solemnity that is slightly ludicrous. Every sort, size and condition of car we see, too, occupied by all grades of humanity, from the celebrated general, the notorious politician joy-riding in France, the distinguished journalist, the official photographer, the lesser brass hat, the Y.M.C.A. padre on the spree, down to the humble and lucky car jumper. Tanks nose their way along, blind and snuffling, like pre-cosmic beasts in the chaotic slime. Busy, puffing caterpillars tug along squat, ugly, wide-mouthed howitzers or slender, graceful guns of great length and range. We look on in silence, for the noise is so loud, and the difficulty of avoiding traffic so great as to make conversation almost impossible. The number of steam waggons, half railway engine, half lorry, remind us of the growing shortage of petrol. A curious wooden structure on four wheels drawn by horses and in appearance something between a Spanish galleon and a gipsy caravan, puzzles us, till we come abreast, and then we see it is a travelling pigeon loft.

That fleet homing bird has become one of the most important and one of the swiftest means of communication in action. Times without number it has saved a desperate situation when all other means and all other rations have failed.

Presently we were able to turn off on to a narrow strip of grass which ran for some miles alongside the road. This was an immense relief to us after the crushing and the jostling of the traffic, and an immense relief also to the horses' feet after the ringing hardness of the road.

Dane's ill-humour had now quite evaporated. He was riding his mare, Amy, whom he loved with a love passing the love of women. He patted her, pulled her ears, teased her, and talked to her endearingly as we trotted along the green and springy turf. The Skipper, still watching the road, remarked at last:

"Only a change in methods!"

"What change? What methods?" I asked.

For a moment he looked at me dreamily, and then laughed. "Why, from the old French wars, you know, which were always so much the fashion with the gilded youth of England. For the last eight hundred years England has fought on these selfsame fields, has ridden along these selfsame roads. English bones lie buried in every foot of this ground. Nothing we do is new; only the engines and the materials change. The spirit never changes. Last year the Black Prince rode with us over the field of Crecy. This year we bivouacked at Agincourt, and in the morning mists Harry of England arrayed again his chivalry with waving plumes and champing bits and clashing harness. Only the externals change!"

He relapsed into silence.

I knew that to him the steel-capped, khaki, overladen horseman on the petrol-reeking road was still the glittering blue and golden Light Dragoon of Fuentes d'Onoro and Balaclava. The muddy trooper of to-day still held for him the essence of that glamour and romance, which, since Assyrian Sarchedon, in the mists of antiquity, first taught his knightly exercises, has been the horseman's heritage through all the ages. To me, however, in spite of their unpuritanical language, our Cavalry suggested more the Ironsides of Cromwell.

A detachment of a Labour Battalion, theoretically working on the road, leant on their spades and watched our column go by. It was a long column, and would keep them thus congenially occupied for several hours. They were untidy, part-worn old creatures, some with spectacles, all with wrinkled care-worn faces and expressions totally devoid of happiness. Yet their lot was safe and easy. Whenever anything the least bit out of the ordinary appeared, they leaned thus on their spades to watch it out of sight; whenever an aeroplane sailed overhead, they gazed upwards till it had faded from the sky—and after.

"That's my job in the next war!" said Dane.

We hastened to assure him it was just about his mark; and then fell to discussing our ideal of jobs for the next war, a very frequent topic of conversation in France.

"Talking of jobs, if you had a wish, what would you like to be doing now?" I asked.

"What, this minute as ever is?" asked the Skipper.

"Yes."

"It's Sunday, isn't it?" he asked.

I replied in the affirmative.

"Thought so—it's our unlucky day, We always start off on these stunts on a Sunday. Well, if I had my choice, I'd like to be on church parade at home, walking up the aisle in blue and gold with sword clattering and spurs jingling on the flags—just for old times' sake. I still love uniforms and swords and pistols and things, you know. If I'd been married I should always have been playing with my unfortunate children's toys."

"Is that your dearest wish too, Dano, to be on church parade?" I asked.

"No," he replied emphatically.

"What is it, then?"

"I decline to make a statement," he said, a favourite expression of his. "I decline to make a statement."

"Bad as that?" asked the Skipper.

Dane then made his statement; but, as this is intended to be a book which the young may read, I am unable to set down here what he would most have wished to be doing.

"Hullo!" said Dane, "here comes old Dunn!"

"What!" said the Skipper, "our own great, red, doughty, indomitable Dunn? So it is."

A largely built officer of a rugged, irregular-featured face, crowned by a mass of fiery hair, rode up to us, looking somewhat top-heavy on a small cream-coloured pony. This was our Adjutant. He was in every way the perfect type of Adjutant, unfailingly reliable in routine, a stern disciplinarian, a just man, of imperturbable composure, and watchfully jealous of the good name of the Regiment. Behind this military

exterior he carried principles, ambitions and powers of mind that will one day raise him to a high place in the councils of the State. But meanwhile, with the patience of the strong, he occupied himself in the faithful and exact discharge of duties which he heartily disliked. He saluted the Skipper with punctilious precision.

"I say, the Colonel wants you to be very particular about march dicipline. Bob is going to be at Villiers Blanc to see us marching past."

The individual thus irreverently alluded to as Bob, was no less a person than our Divisional Commander.

"Right-ho!" said the Skipper. "You don't happen to know which side of the road he'll be on?"

"No; but I'll tip you the wink as soon as we see him."

"Right; and I'll shove all the thinnest horses over on to the other side."

Dunn then told us all the latest rumours from above about the coming gap. The consensus of opinion was that our offensive would be launched in Flanders, but as yet no definite information had filtered down as far as Regiments. Then, after retailing all the latest military gossip, and the inner history of the last ungumming—for soldiers are worse gossips than women—he threw another mighty salute and cantered away whence he had come.

For some time clouds of lead and gloom had been gathering in the sky. Now a drizzling rain began to fall.

"We've never done a march yet without it blinking well pouring," grumbled Dane.

And this sentiment was echoed all along the ranks

with variations and embellishments as we halted to put on our mackintoshes.

Just outside St. Pol there was a long, damp, and dreary wait. We learned that there had been some hitch in the billeting, that the areas had not yet been distributed, and that the billeting parties were still in St. Pol.

"Perhaps you'd like to push along and see old Purple grimly billeting, and incidentally get out of the wet?" said the Skipper.

"Rather!" I replied, always glad of a chance of seeing something new.

So I rode on, over the railway crossing, and into the insignificant little town, which, in mediæval days, had had such a wide renown, and so much political importance. I caught up a cold, wet, depressed and sullen little party just as Regiments had at last received their areas from the harassed Staff Captain—whom three thousand shivering soldiery were bitterly cursing from the bottom of their hearts, though he had been in no way whatever to blame for the delay.

There was no time to inspect the area. Eddie, the Regimental Second-in-Command, divided it off into four different sections, as fairly as might be from the map. He himself chose the area for R.H.Q.; then the representatives of each Squadron drew lots for choice of the remaining three. To our lot fell a single, huge farmhouse. As there were no other houses at all in our area, it looked as if our billeting was going to be easy and rapid. But on occasions like this, Purple was a strong silent man, not giving to vain conjecture, or to any expressions of emotion. He made no comment. We started off at a brisk trot, through deep dense woods, along a gradually ascending path: but,

on account of the mud and the pine needles underfoot, the ground was so slippery that we had very soon to pull up to a walk.

Contented and easeful silence is said to be the highest proof of friendship. But it is my misfortune that I cannot feel at ease in silence for any length of time, and every now and then I hazarded some remark to Purple; but he either grunted or gave no sign of having heard whatever. So after a while this one-sided conversation came to an end.

Presently we came out of the woods, rode about half a mile up a country road, and arrived at our farm. It was large, prosperous, and typical of such French farms. Four wings enclosed a great square farmyard, which was filled with refuse, manure, and a green and evil-smelling pond. One wing, that on our left as we entered the gate, consisted entirely of the dwelling-house itself. The other three consisted of barns, granaries, pigsties, rabbit-pens, stables and cattle-sheds. To the wall opposite the entrance were affixed numbers of metal plates, each inscribed with some writing which we could not read from the ground, and which at once excited my curiosity. I learned later that these represented prizes won by cattle of the farm.

We dismounted, passed through the main entrance, knocked at the door of the house, and asked to see the owner of the farm. A tall, buxom, commanding lady of high colour and distinguished presence, who, with arms bared, was busied about the household washing, came forward to receive us. Assuming the conventional billeting smile—though in his case it was more like a snarl—Purple asked Madame if she could have the goodness to accommodate nine officers, a hundred

men, and a hundred and twenty horses. Madame threw up her hands in horror. She had had cavalry before; she did not want them again. The officers and the soldiers yes, but the horses, "*pas possible, pas moyen!*"

To my surprise Purple now showed himself a master of diplomacy and pathos.

"It didn't really matter," he said, "we were just going to battle; we could picket our horses on the roadside, and sleep alongside them. We didn't mind the rain and mud and cold—we were used to it. Nothing mattered as long as we could help to liberate la belle France, and end the so terrible war. Forgive us for having deranged you. Adieu, Madame, and thanks much."

Now Madame did not want horses on her farm; but she did want the billeting money for nine officers, an officer's mess, and a hundred other ranks. Moreover she was a good and kind-hearted woman. Still volubly protesting, she called her factor and bade him show us around. This weather-beaten, elderly man was by no means amiable or helpful. In spite, however, of his continual undertone of objection, Purple examined every nook and cranny of the farm, every building that had a roof over it, every wall that had a door through it. As we climbed each loft of the barns, as we opened each gate of the sheds, the factor repeated his expostulations.

"The corn, m'sieu, the corn!" and again, "Les vaches les vaches—ah oui, c'est bon pour vous mais les vaches, les vaches! Pas moyen, pas moyen! We have come from having had horses here before, and look! Tout à fait abîmé—abîmé!"

It was evident that the fruits of the harvest, the

live stock, and the farm implements had been carefully disposed over all the available space with the deliberate intention of denying the shelter of every roof to British horses. With great difficulty we prevailed upon our unwilling guide to make room in the spacious stables for certain favoured horses of the greater personages of the Squadroon. For the remainder Purple selected standings in the open, sheltered as far as possible by walls and outhouses from the wind and rain. Here again, in every instance, rose the everlasting protest and lamentation. Although we chose a strip of hard gravel soil, on which no blade of grass could ever hope to grow, the old man wailed his dismal refrain, "La pâture, pâture! pour les vaches, les vaches!"

We entirely understood his difficulties, his point of view; and we entirely understood, too, that an old, illiterate peasant could not be expected to understand our difficulties and our point of view, or to meet us in a spirit of statesmanlike compromise. But the time had now come for firmness. We had seen the entire resources of the establishment. We should do no damage to the farm or to its produce, but what we required, which we could take without injury to the owners, we now proceeded to take. Purple curtly dismissed the factor. His face was richly blue from rain and cold, his jaws snapped together like a steel trap, his lips set in a hard thin line. The factor looked at him, stopped short in the beginning of a new lamentation and went.

"I hate these French worse than the Boche," said Purple.

He then divided the available accommodation into four troop areas. Lots were again drawn, and the

representative of each troop chose his area in the order of his drawing and forthwith set about arranging all the details of domestic economy as in permanent billets, while I looked on marvelling at this thoroughness with which all preparations were made for the halt of a single night.

Presently Purple turned to me.

"Padre, you might ride down to the cross-roads by the wood and show the Squadroon the way up, would you?"

The rain was falling in torrents when I met a very bedraggled and dejected soldiery.

"Hullo, 'ullo, 'ullo!" said the Skipper, as I arrived, "how are we fixed?"

Above all things I dislike being the bearer of bad news. Possibly a remote ancestor perished for that involuntary crime at the hands of some forgotten Cyrus.

"Well, I don't think it's up to much. The men aren't too bad."

"Horses under cover?"

"Er—no—not exactly."

"In the open?"

"Y-yes."

"Oh, God!"

And he spoke no more till we were nearing the entrance of the farm. Then he said with a chuckle:

"Watch old Purple! I always ask him as a matter of course how we're fixed, and it doesn't matter whether we're in palaces or pigsties, he always answers 'Blinky!' He does so on principle—not to raise false hopes and subsequent disappointment. Sound, you know, essentially sound, backbone of England!"

Even so it befell. Purple came out to meet us,

grimly saluted, and replied in the one pithy epithet to the invariable question gravely asked him by the Skipper.

The troop representatives each led away his dripping Army. Eiffel went off to see about the mess and the officers' beds, and the Skipper, with the rain streaming off his tin hat, wearily dragged his long legs around each billet and horse standing. Bill, who was a man of steady and even temper, given neither to optimism nor to cribbing, a man who always did his best under all circumstances without argument or question, though sometimes rather sadly, now made only one remark: "It's a lucky man that was killed at Mons," he said, and straightway set about putting down his line. Jimmie said nothing at all. Afterwards, in the mess, he would have something, a great deal perhaps, to say in direct and forceful language about the weather, and men, and horses, and guns, and Huns, and wars, and rumours of wars; but now he just "got on with it" without wasting time and breath on useless words. Coming around a corner into the domain of the Second Army, I heard the Skipper saying, "Men, Dano, not supermen." So I thought it advisable to postpone the visit and to go and see how old Eiffel was getting on in the mess. On the way I ran into Eddie, the Regimental Second-in-Command. He had allotted the areas to the Squadrons; it had been impossible for him to see them himself beforehand, and now, whether they were good or bad, he could not alter them. But it was his duty to come around and ask how we were fixed, so he had come. He rode up through the splashing mud, a slender, handsome figure on a great bay horse and, although he could

not improve our material condition, he never failed to leave us more cheerful than he had found us. He was, perhaps, the most universally liked officer in the Regiment; and also, perhaps, the least understood. He had a singularly sweet disposition, a surpassing charm of manner, very exceptional intelligence, and a coolness and soundness in action which at once won the confidence of all who served under him. He dearly loved leisure and luxury, the sports of the country, the pleasures of great cities; but since he had landed with the original B.E.F., he had only been absent from his Regiment on the ordinary periods of leave; and when in the extremes of hardship and discomfort, which he most thoroughly detested, he had never been known to utter any word of complaint, or to be anything but gay and charming. A gentle modesty and shy reserve veiled deep clear places in his soul—into which it is not my business to pry. He smiled at me now.

"Well?" he asked.

"Horses all in the open," I answered.

"How perfectly rotten! I suppose every one's grousing like hell?"

"They are moaning a bit," I admitted.

"Yes," he said, "it usually rains at the end of a march, and, no matter how good the billets are, every one is in the depths of despair when we first arrive and say they're the worst they've ever had, until they get settled in a bit. But this really does look bad; however, God will provide!"

And with a farewell smile and a wave of his hand, he rode on.

Madame was still slightly resentful at the intrusion of our horses. But she had given us a large comfortable

room for a mess, a room which had often been used for that purpose before, as a large notice hung on the wall reminding M. les Officiers that, in the absence of her husband and sons at the war, Madame alone was burdened with the sole charge of the farm, and requesting them to retire not later than 9.30 p.m.

The Skipper was accommodated with a small and comfortable bedroom leading out of the mess, and the rest of us were provided for in a wonderful dormitory upstairs. A part of the loft, filled with grain and roots, had been partitioned off with a curtain. In this space one dressing-table, two real beds, and ten beds improvised of beams and boxes, had been established; all for the convenience of British officers. Than this billet-money-making contrivance I have never seen any greater proof of the thrift and foresight of the rural French.

Having divested myself of my sodden kit, and staked out my claim, as it were, by putting the driest articles of it on one of the two real beds, I went down again to the mess, where Corkran, paragon of waiters, had already spread a tempting repast of cold meats and canned fruits, miraculously produced by him from the inexhaustible cornucopia of our one small food pack.

CHAPTER VI

THE GAP

ONE by one our great Leaders dropped into the mess, and one by one their spirits visibly revived as their hungry eyes fell upon the good things already set out upon the table. The young human animal differs not at all from the other animals in that his food, especially in times of war, is one of the predominating factors of his existence. That spirit of adventure too, which beats so strongly in our island blood, which sent our Drakes roving the unknown seas an d our Livingstones into the uttermost jungles of the earth, now stirred in us, who soon might make a greater journey still, with a new and exhilarating force. We had, in fact, reached that definite stage in warlike operations when all grumbling among officers ceases as a matter of course, and when, come what may, we never forget that we are the leaders, by whom a high example must be set. But with us these seemed subconscious motives.

Drenched to the bone though we were, that little luncheon of the simplest food and wine was as full of spontaneous merriment as any I have ever attended in private house or restaurant. Afterwards, however, while we gathered around the fire to dry ourselves, an

untoward incident occurred, which almost resulted in the whole Squadroon being ejected from its hard-won resting-place. In the wing opposite to our window was a pigeon-loft, around which a number of birds were wheeling and turning in a manner most tempting to boy, the slayer. Jimmie had been watching them for some time, as a terrier watches a rat-hole.

"What do you bet," he asked at last, "that I don't down a pigeon, flying, first shot with the rifle?"

Eiffel, away as usual in the shadows, stopped crooning over his game of patience, and peered up through his pince-nez. He could never resist a bet. He habitually betted on the most unusual subjects, whether, for instance, a mouldered corpse in no man's land was ours or theirs—and would then crawl out at the risk of his life to decide the question.

"I'll g-g-g-give you a hundred f-f-francs to f-f-for, to f-f-for, to f-f-f-, a hundredtoforty," he offered.

"You blinking old Jew!" cried Jimmie, "I said flying! Make it a hundred to one?"

After a good deal of wrangling the bet was finally laid at a hundred to two.

Jimmie went to the window and fired at a hovering pigeon. Once in a century, I suppose, such flukes do occur. The pigeon dropped stone dead. There was a moment of awe-struck silence and then shouts of delight went up from the whole mess—except Eiffel. A moment later Madame burst in upon us like a tornado. She spoke so much and so fast that we could not understand her words, but we were in no doubt about her meaning. Handicapped by the absence of Tub's fluent French and ingratiating manner with the natives, we were unable to explain that we never had any intention of shooting her

pigeons; that this flying shot had only been a joke; and that Madame ought to be hugely pleased at having witnessed a feat of marksmanship which she could never again hope to see in the course of a life-time. As it was, not being able to say any of these things, we bowed our heads in silence to the storm, feeling extremely foolish and uncomfortable.

"Jimmie!" whispered the Skipper at last, "you've made a hundred francs, buy the blasted bird for twenty-five, or we'll all be walking the streets to-night!"

And in this way we purchased our salvation.

In the midst of the commotion Frank had come into the room. He stood stiffly to attention with a face of stone, while the tempest raged around him. When the indemnity had been paid and Madame had departed, he handed the Skipper a note.

"Oho!" said the latter. "Now we shall hear something. The C.O. will see Squadron Leaders at R.H.Q. at 16 hours to-day. Dammit, I've left my log tables behind—that's four, isn't it? Never could do maths. Half three now, and it's a good two miles. I'll have to push off toot sweet. Good-bye-ee, chaps!" And he strode out of the room putting on his dripping mackintosh as he went.

"Half a mo!" I shouted, "I'm coming too. I've never seen St. Pol, and I particularly want to have a look at that quaint old church we passed to-day."

The heavy downpour had ceased; but a soft light rain was still falling as we entered the outskirts of the town. The Skipper took off his mackintosh and carried it over his arm. Although puzzled for a moment, I quickly discerned the object of this action. A further addition had recently been made to his

already long row of ribbons, and he wanted to display his blazonry before the eyes of the totally indifferent inhabitants of St. Pol. It is, indeed, a curious conceit that makes us wish thus to show off the small and misleading emblems of our prowess to the most complete strangers who care not one jot who we are or what we have done. We fondly imagine, I suppose, that they will be filled with admiration and with envy. I myself, when I received a small decoration, as a compliment rather to my cloth than as a reward for work well done, often felt a strong desire to place myself in positions from which the ribbon could most easily be seen. That, perhaps, was how I now read so easily the Skipper's mind. There are few men who have not some secret petty vanities, jealously locked up in the very bottom of their hearts. And there are few men who would not rather be charged with dark and shameful crimes than have these same vanities exposed to the public gaze and ridicule. It was characteristic of the Skipper that, although he had such vanities in a marked degree, he was entirely above any attempt at concealing them. He caught my eye and smiled.

"Why shouldn't I give the girls of St. Pol a treat?" he said. "If I didn't show 'em this little lot they might never guess what a hell of a lad I am! Besides," he added, "I thoroughly deserve them all. I am positively the bravest of the brave. Since I was smashed up I've completely lost my nerve, and if most fellows felt like I do in action I'm sure they'd leg it. Perhaps I should too if I dared."

"But when people see all your ribbons, they'll only think you've been on the Staff!" I answered, laughing.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, and put on his mackintosh again.

We parted at R.H.Q., arranging to meet again afterwards at the Officers' Club.

On our homeward way the Skipper bought large quantities of chocolate and a colossal box of French nougat, "for the children," he said; and also a large and highly artistic box of chocolates with which to placate Madame, of whom he stood in considerable awe. He was not communicative about the Conference at R.H.Q.

"The whole show seems to be hanging fire on account of the rain," he said, "and the infm. was very hazy. But we'll all go through it together before dinner. Sampson of the Corps Staff has gone up to see whether the country is still fit for Cavalry."

As we toiled up the hill the Skipper suddenly stopped and exclaimed with mock solemnity:

"'Ark! The mullen sutter of the guns!"

Low and terrible it came, that sullen roll of distant drum-fire. No other sound I know ever fills me with such an awful excitement. We peered through the misty rain and gloom into the direction of Lens. So faint as to be almost imperceptible, we saw now and then the ghostly flashes and the pale tracks of the ever-soaring lights.

"A raid?" I suggested.

"It could be," he answered, "or perhaps just an evening hate."

We walked on in thoughtful silence to the farm. From the men's billets feeble shafts of light struggled with the darkness, and a sound of singing came forth—a melancholy long-drawn-out moaning sound:

"There's a long, long trail a-winding
Into the land of my dreams."

It is curious how strong a stimulus music has upon the memory. Certain airs are for ever associated in my mind with certain incidents of the War. When an urchin whistles them in the street, or a barrel-organ grinds them out under my window, vivid pictures of old comrades and old scenes in madman's-land rise up with startling clearness before me; and when the tune is the "Long, long trail" I see the dim lights of that old French farm in the black night, the sad rain falling, the ghostly flashes in the distance; and I hear those voices singing, and the sinister throbbing drum-fire—the near future all unknown.

"Splendid!" said the Skipper, as the dirge came to our ears.

"But it doesn't sound as though they're particularly happy," I remarked.

"They're not," he answered, laughing. "When they sing like that it means they've sounded the depths of misery. From now on they'll get more and more cheerful."

In the house, too, we found an unexpected scene of song and revelry and reconciliation. In Madame's own parlour Tubs was seated at the piano, while all our mess, Madame herself, her daughter and sundry of her poor relations, who occupied a semi-menial position in the household, were thickly gathered around him, singing in chorus. Tears of emotion stood in Madame's eyes. It seemed that her heart had been melted, first with motherly compassion for the extreme youth of Jimmie, and secondly by a genius stroke on the part of Tubs, who, on his belated arrival, had gone straight to the piano and played "La Rêve

passe"—at that time a very popular piece in France. Henceforward she was our very good and kind friend. She was passionately fond of music, and produced many old scores dating from her own school-days, which Tubs or Tiny—one of our supernumerary officers—would play to her in their spare time, and to which she sometimes sang in a low and rather passé voice.

Before dinner the Skipper unfolded to us the broad outlines of the coming break-through. As yet no details had been divulged beyond the position of assembly and the divisional objectives. As yet we had only the one map. Nevertheless, it was strangely thrilling to look at those places, now far behind the German lines, which we hoped would be so soon our own; to picture from the map the exact shape and aspect of the country over which we should soon be riding; and to feel that we ourselves were in a mighty secret quite unknown to such great persons as the Kaiser and Hindenburg himself.

Needless to say the scheme was copiously discussed by us all, and unsparingly criticized, especially by our younger members. It was thought by most of us that the scheme was too ambitious; that the distance to be covered on Zero day between the position of asembly and the final objective was beyond the powers of a laden troop horse within one winter's day. I wondered if Haig, the sound and silent, in his distant sanctuary, ever supposed that small urchins of nineteen dealt hardly with his considered plans of operation!

One, two, four days passed; the rain continued falling and we moved not. Many rumours and a few orders came through to us. Purple, to his exceeding annoyance, was appointed liaison officer between our

Brigade and the Division. Eiffel was nominated to the "pool." A certain number of officers from each Regiment were collected and kept behind in some place of safety, in order to replace the casualties of the battle; and this reserve of cannon fodder was called the "pool." Later on others would be taken as divisional, brigade, and regimental gallopers, until, as the Skipper complained, he would be left without any Troop Leaders at all.

Late in the evening of the fourth day a note arrived from the Adjutant, announcing the expert's report on the scene of our projected operations. It was laconic and final:

"The Cavalry cannot function unless they are mounted on ducks."

The "gap" was off.

"It never did seem like the business," said Purple.

I myself heard the news with mixed feelings. We were all young, and all abundantly gifted with the joy of life. We had all been in great battles before, we had no illusions as to what they were, and we felt thankful at being delivered out of the perils and hardships of another great battle. But our party was strangely dull and silent at dinner that night. To-morrow we should meet Infantry and Tanks and other honest men on the road; and we should be going the other way. This movement of "files about" at the eleventh hour was becoming, through no fault of our own, a matter of regular routine. It was good to be sure of living on a little longer; life is very sweet, and we were grateful for the respite—and yet, somehow, and yet?

CHAPTER VII

CAMBRAI

A FEW weeks later we started again on a gap. The whole atmosphere and movement of this gap was very different from the last. This time there was no long prefatory period of rumours, no postponed marches, no uncertainty about our aim. The secret of an enterprise so gigantic had been kept with a closeness that was nothing short of miraculous. Late in the evening of November 14th we received orders that the Brigade would march the following night to Bray-sur-Somme. Until that moment no gentlest whisper of coming mighty events had anywhere been heard. And, when the orders did come, we knew with a sure instinct that this time it was in the very sooth the "business."

The night was dark and still. At a slow walk we marched steadily along the road through Villers-Bretonneux, thrilling to an excitement which we had never felt during any period of the last abortive enterprise. For more than two years the routine of trench warfare had repeated itself with unvarying monotony. Now a change had come. As a hunter tracks his game, we were stealthily stalking through the darkness. On our road, and on a hundred other roads, columns

of every kind, and terrible engines of death, stole forward upon our unsuspecting prey. When we were halted, if we thought to listen hard, we could hear and feel that all the immense void of night was alive with this stealthy monster moment.

I listened for a while to the creeping darkness, and then, with a little shudder, turned and joined a cheerful group which stood talking at the head of the Squadroon. All were in the highest spirits, laughing and jesting with an extravagance which was not quite natural; which, in fact, sounded as though we were all slightly intoxicated with the excitement and suspense of our momentous undertaking. Many times since I have noticed that, when on the threshold of a great danger, we often displayed this somewhat feverish gaiety, lest, perhaps, other and darker thoughts should enter our minds, or lest we should betray to our companions the cold qualms by which we were every now and then shaken.

Day was at hand when we reached the battered village of Bray. It had been cruelly pounded during the battles of the Somme. Many of its houses lay flat in utter ruin; all had been more or less destroyed, and a few, a very few only, were still fit for human habitation.

In the little broken cottage which we made our mess, an old, bent couple were still living. Love of home and greed of gain had tempted them to brave the terrors and the horrors of intense bombardments; and the proverbial good fortune which favours the brave had brought them through years of constant peril all unscathed.

Tired out though we were with the length and slowness of the march, we despatched a simple meal

of bully beef and cider with the appetite and merriment of a point-to-point luncheon. Afterwards the great Leaders laid them down to sleep on the cold, brick floor, fully dressed and wrapt only in their martial cloaks and one blanket apiece; while the Skipper and I betook ourselves to the tiny bedroom which had been found for us in the other end of the village. A piteous, plaintive old lady was our hostess. Unlike the old people of the mess she had not braved out the battles and bombardments, but had returned to what was left of her home after the enemy's withdrawal to the Hindenberg Line. Our room was small and squalid in the extreme. Two wrecks of iron bedsteads filled almost the whole space. The beds were piled high with a mass of filthy, parti-coloured rags. Their appearance was unpleasant, their smell was worse.

"Makes you scratch, just to look at 'em! What about it?" said the Skipper.

We discussed the indelicate question in doubt and sorrow for some time. I was in favour of returning to the mess and sleeping on the floor with the others, rolled up in our coats and blankets, but the Skipper finally decided to stay.

"In any case," he said, referring to the hereditary enemy of man, "we're bound to get 'em in a day or two—and this is probably our last chance of a warm sleep till God knows when. And anyway, 'How can man die better than facing fearful odds?'"

That same evening, when darkness was falling, we set out again upon the road. Now, like Satan's outcast legions in the chaos, we took our way through a weird and eerie wilderness of madman's land. A year ago withering blasts of fire and steel had swept

all that air, and where tall poplars had once lined the road in regular order was now only here and there a riven, ragged stump. Occasional flashes of a torch to left or right showed us always, in its ghostly beam, old trench and rusty wire, endless tangled wire, with here and there a rough, wooden cross or battered helmet on a stake, to mark some unknown soldier's grave; and not seldom showed us, too, the skeleton or the dust and ashes of some once smiling town. Stretching far away to east and west an endless line of pale stars soared and floated in the firmament, and then fell flickering despairfully into chaos again. From the distance, and growing louder as we progressed, came intermittently, dull boomings and the flat re-echoing crash of bursting crumps; and high in the heavens overhead great shells sighed dreamily as they sped upon their errands of destruction. From time to time a lurid flash on the horizon lit up for a moment with dim and ghastly radiance the infinite expanse of formless, awful waste around us. And again all the night was full of stealthy movement and the whisperings of the dead.

Hour after hour, mile upon mile we toiled along through this unearthly semblance of the infernal regions. Short broken snatches of sleep only during the previous day, and the long, slow marching, always at the walk, had taken the edge off that high spirit with which we had started out upon this adventure on the night before. We seemed to have been marching all our lives through a nightmare land of eternal night. Men nodded in their saddles; horses blundered and stumbled, and sometimes came down with a clatter on the road. All were too sleepy for conversation. Then at last there came a halt. Torches flashed

in the distance, orders were passed down the line, the voices of Purple and his billeting party were heard; Squadrons, moving at a snail's pace, filed off the road; we ploshed through much mud and finally, at a row of troughs, the tedious and difficult operation of watering in the dark was carried out.

We learned that we were in the village of Trefcon. There were here already permanent horse lines, Adrian huts for the men and a Nissen hut for the officers of each Squadron, so that billeting was a very simple affair.

With the exception of a rough table and one broken bed frame, our hut was bare; or more than bare, since, most of the floor boards and panels having been used by our predecessors for firewood, the wind whistled dolefully through the joints in the sheet iron and up through the gaps in the floor.

As usual on such occasions, directly we get in from lodging our men and horses, we set about a meal. Tinned salmon, canned apricots, a bottle of whisky, and a jug of steaming "coffee to the milk" soon made their appearance. It was on the whole a silent meal, distinguished rather by the capacity and prowess of the performers than by raillery and chatter.

As no definite news had yet reached us regarding the day of battle, and as, for all we knew, it might be that very morning, we lost no time in "getting down to it" on the damp, muddy floor, where, in spite of some hardness and the chilly draughts, we were soon sunk deep in slumber.

The morning was well advanced by the time that Frank aroused us with the welcome tidings that we would not be marching that night. The day, however,

was full of occupation and excitement. The plan of battle in its minutest details, was communicated down to all ranks; and the Squadroon had been allotted a thrilling rôle. The small frontage for which it was to be responsible covered a lot of names that are now famous in military history, and its final objective was the capture of a suburb of Cambrai wherein a German Corps commander was said to have his headquarters. As the Skipper went through the plan, telling off the advanced Troops, the Troop sectors, special patrols, and all the innumerable other details, I had a strange feeling of unreality; it all seemed so like an ordinary training scheme; and Jimmie rubbed his eyes to make sure that he was not back at the Divisional School. One particular rôle at the School, that of an independent mission, had always appealed most strongly to the imagination of the adventurous, and now in the operation orders we read that a certain Regiment was to detail a Squadron to make its way right through the broken and confused enemy, and to blow up an important railway bridge far away behind his lines. We all wondered who had been selected for this hazardous enterprise; whether he was any one we knew; what he and his Squadron were thinking and saying about it at that moment; and what luck they would have on the day.

As for our own rôle, we did not think that we could get through the cavalry track and so far on in one day; but the near prospect of open warfare, in which we were all highly trained and fully confident in ourselves, filled us with renewed excitement. Our scheme was precisely the same as hundreds of other schemes which we had practised behind the lines during the last two years, and every one felt sure

that he would know exactly how to deal with every situation which could possibly arise. And although this is a thing of which no one speaks, even to his nearest friend, there were doubtless thoughts in many of our minds that here would be a chance of displaying great qualities, qualities hitherto totally unsuspected by our superiors and known only to ourselves!—a great chance of winning D.S.O.'s and M.C.'s. The very familiarity of the scheme seemed somehow to preclude all thoughts of danger and of death. All day we spent in discussing our rôle, colouring in the contours on our newly issued maps, and testing Hotchkiss Guns. By nightfall no further orders had arrived. To the detriment of our hut and the British tax-payer, but to our own great advantage, we had managed to "scrounge" a stove, and we early lay down around a blazing fire, for we were all old soldiers enough to lose no opportunity of sleeping when out on the war-path.

The next day passed in the same way. No orders came; we did not move, our confidence and interest in no way abated. Then another day and another passed, and still no move. This strain of waiting gradually began to make itself seen in our behaviour. The steeplechase rider waiting for the flag to fall, the high diver looking down at the sea, feel, in the anticipation, tremors far more acute than in the performance. I noticed that there was an unusual demand for whisky, that there were outbursts of wild, unnatural merriment, punctuated by periods of brooding silence, that we laughed immoderately at things which were not in the least amusing; sometimes at things which were even horrible. As for myself, I was every now and then seized with a

terrible sinking at the heart, an agony of apprehension, an utter cowardice, of which I was bitterly ashamed, but which I found it very difficult to overcome.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, when nerves were wearing thin, the final orders came. We were to march at three o'clock in the morning; consequently, as saddles had to be packed overnight, we were without blankets or any kind of comfort for what there remained to us of the night. The air was cold, the stove became possessed of a devil, throwing out volumes of suffocating smoke but no heat, and one by one we got up from the floor and passed the hours before "turn out" in walking up and down the hut in a vain attempt to keep warm.

At last, with a feeling of relief at being on the move again, and too cold to wonder much about where we should spend the following night, we started out for the position of assembly. At 6 a.m. we reached a place where a "hot meal" of cold and greasy pea-soup had been prepared for us. Zero hour, we knew, was 6.20. While the men, still holding their reins, lay down and slept beside their horses, the officers of the Squadroon stood on a little ridge looking eagerly at their watches and out over the German lines. As the minute-hand crept on to within a few seconds of the fateful hour I thrilled through and through with strange emotions. I pictured the German lines, the daily routine in progress, the tired men in grey preparing for a little rest after the anxieties of another night now safely passed. I pictured our Infantry, tense and crouching, our great fleet of Tanks, blind and beastly, snuffling after blood.

The minute-hand crept on; only a few seconds to go. We stood very silent now. 6.20!

Not the voice of one great signal gun, but with a blinding flash of flame and one great crashing roar all the myriad guns belched and bellowed on the instant. The earth trembled under our feet, the noise was deafening. Soon from all along the German line, signals of distress soared up into the sky, till the pale dawn was all lit up with many coloured stars, red and white and green and golden rain, piteously calling for help from batteries that had already ceased to be, overwhelmed by the sudden deluge.

The roaring thunder of our guns seemed to increase in violence and intensity. I pictured now the tortured earth, the cowering Huns; our Infantry following close behind the moving wall of flame and shard; the Tanks waddling horribly, breathing fire and smeared with blood. And I hoped and prayed with passionate fervour that all was going well. So awful were the prospect and the sounds of this great wrath that I was almost overcome. My knees knocked together and I began to tremble all over my body until I had to leave our little group and sit down on the bank, pretending to watch the bombardment through my glasses in order to conceal this most unmanly weakness.

One hour, two hours went by. As yet no news came in. We were all very silent, some of us showing in a marked degree that sharpness of temper which often precedes the near entry into battle. The ramping party of selected officers and men from the Indian Division, armed with picks and shovels, were following, we knew, close behind our Infantry, making with cool swift hands the cavalry track. We pictured the dark bearded faces with their glistening eyes, the lithe

bodies bending to their task, dragging aside the tangled wire, filling in the shell-holes, planking bog and swamp, bridging the torn and gaping trenches, moving to one side the dying and the dead, labouring at the quick narrow road along which twenty thousand horse must soon be pouring, over the chaos, and out on to the open, promised land beyond.

Another hour, another two hours went by. Rumours, fragments of news, came in. All was going well, they said, better even than could have been expected. But still we did not move. Yet another two hours dragged on before the order came to mount. It was then past midday, and evident to the youngest of us that, as far as the Cavalry were concerned, the plan had failed. In another four hours it would be dark. We knew from previous experience how slow and painful is the passage of a cavalry track. We knew that the scheme which we had so carefully rehearsed, the brilliant feats of derring-do of which we had so often dreamed, were now not to be. We knew that it was too late.

With darkness a drenching rain began to fall. That night and the next day we spent in a shell-hole, about half-way down the cavalry track, listening to a furious battle just ahead; and the following night, without having fired a shot or swung a sword, we went back in mud and darkness and in shame to the place where we had started from.

A few days later the tide of battle turned. What had been the most swift and brilliant British victory in the war, was near to becoming the most crushing disaster. In those critical days the Squadroon played its part at Bourlon Wood; but its part was that of unskilled and stubborn infantry.

CHAPTER VIII

ARMEENS

AFTER the battles of Cambrai the Cavalry went into winter quarters around about the populous and flourishing city of Amiens—pronounced, in the vulgar language of the camp, Armeens.

The Squadroon found itself in a dilapidated little village, already filled to overflowing with swarms of those most pitiable of people, refugees from the devastated areas. Our mess was in an old-fashioned, rambling farmhouse, cold and uncomfortable beyond any words, but one to which we shall always look back with tenderness, for Madame's sister-in-law, Marie, was a lady so pretty, so witty and so charming, that very soon we were all fathoms deep in love.

We passed some happy weeks in the full enjoyment of peace and plenty, and in all the delights which that country so bountifully afforded. Pheasants abounded in the many woods; the endless rolling fields of stubble covered quantities of game. We bought a couple of serviceable guns in Amiens, we assiduously cultivated the owners of the land, and we joyfully accepted their kind and frequent invitations to "le sport"—knowing nevertheless that we did so, so to speak, with our commissions in our hands, for shooting, other than the

Hun, was strictly forbidden in the British Army. On these shoots we learned, among other things and to our great surprise, that the "Frog" is a real good sportsman and a remarkably fine shot. Hare hunting was another popular form of amusement. The hare always runs in a circle, and by skilfully disposing ourselves over a wide area, one taking up the chase as soon as the other's horse was blown, we used to ride them down in a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes. Then came a heavy and lasting fall of snow. The Frenchman, who we somehow imagined only shot birds sitting, until we saw him wiping our eye again and again, does not shoot at all when game is weak and numbed with frost. So for a time our sport came to an end.

Then orders came through for a trench party. This meant that each Regiment involved would send up a formation of about two hundred and forty strong —neither a regiment nor a company; and that each Brigade would send up three such formations, to take the place of a battalion in the line; and some confusion would arise from its having to relieve four small companies with these three larger formations.

It was a matter of custom in the Squadroon that when any battle party was called for, every officer formed up and volunteered to go. A certain number had always to stay behind with the horses, and the Skipper's system was to take those for the line as far as possible by turn, and, when there was a doubt between the turn of any two, to settle the question by three cold hands of poker. Had it not been for the sweet sorrow of leaving fair Marie, all would have preferred to go up with the party; not because they enjoyed a tour of winter trenches, but because they

detested being left behind with one man only to look after every six horses.

What, for simplicity's sake, I shall call the Brigade-battalion, was commanded in turn by the three Regimental Commanders; and the Regimental-company was likewise commanded in turn by the three squadron leaders. This time it was the Skipper's turn to command, and consequently the Squadroon's turn to furnish a headquarter staff for the Regimental-company. Since Bourlon Wood there had been some changes in our ranks. Tubs had left us for the Olympian heights of R.H.Q. in replacement of the Adjutant, who had been wounded. Old Bill was back in Blighty with a "cushy one" through the fleshy part of his thigh. The leadership of the First Army was now in the hands of Hector, a blue-eyed giant in stature, a giant in athletic renown, who had lately returned to the fold after being long laid low of a nasty wound at Arras. Tiny, in all the pride of his four foot ten inches, rode at the head of the Fourth Army. And Sam'l the Silent had joined the General Staff of the Third Army.

From the Squadroon then, Purple went as Second-in-Command of the party, Hector as Master-Bomber, Eiffel and Jimmie as Platoon Leaders, Tiny as Gas Officer attached to H.Q., Micky O'Grady as Sergeant-Major, and Jerry as S.Q.M.S. William Henry was left behind with a plurality of offices upon his capable shoulders. Two officers from each of the other squadrons and myself made up the numbers of our mess to ten.

The Skipper was in great heart at the prospect.

"I don't know what it is," he said. "but there's a tremendous fascination about the trenches. You sit

in your dug-out—a pretty deep one, I hope—and you pore over your maps and aeroplane photos, and pit your wits against the Boche doing the same thing over the way, We always go all out to catch a few prisoners night-patrolling; it bucks fellows up no end if you do. And besides, as regards myself, I'm sick of living on sharks and hens. You can't diet in the trenches, and there I scoff meats and puddings and carrots and potatoes, and all such rare forbidden fruits. Usually have to go to bed for a week when we get back, but it's worth it."

"Yes, I quite understand the call of your carnal appetites," I answered, "but I don't understand, though, why the men are so keen to go up. The line in winter can't be much of a picnic for them?"

"No—that is so. You see, the Cavalry, not being equipped for war, are always either very comfortable or very uncomfortable. We have our echelon with us up to the last possible moment, what time we are very comfortable. But once we leave it, having no packs, cookers, gun-carriers and other feet conveniences, we go through toils and tribulations quite undreamed of by the Infantry. But, back here in comfort, the men get bored stiff with the monotonous routine, and the everlasting cleaning of saddlery and grooming of even two horses. It's the craving for change and the prospect of being left with six horses that makes 'em all so keen to go up."

The Skipper went up a day ahead of the party, to reconnoitre the line and to get in touch with local conditions. I also seized the opportunity of going with him.

Before going into the line in winter the wise man always, if possible, does some shopping. Woolly

vests, woolly pants, woolly gloves, woolly scarf, stout boots large enough to take two or even three pairs of woolly socks, woolly cap, refills for torches, reserves of tobacco, large quantities of cigarettes and chocolate, boxes of matches by the gross, are all essential to comfort and efficiency.

So, in order to make good any deficienices or to replace such of these articles in our kit as had fallen on evil days and were unlikely to do credit to themselves and to us in the battle and the breeze, we allowed ourselves a day in Armeens *en route*. Having cut ourselves a stout trench stick apiece from the neighbouring thicket, against rats, duck-boards and such man-killing carnivora, we left Dano—railing on Lady Fortune in good set terms at being left behind in charge of details—with our farewell blessing, and, early in the morning, fared us forth upon our way to Amiens.

When our shopping was done there arose the nice point of where to lunch. A nice point, I say advisedly, because opinion differed variously on this delicate question. Some there were who swore by all their gods and the Godbert. Others held that prettier eating was to be had at Les Huitres. Others again, the æsthetically minded, maintained that the charms of dainty Marguerite outweighed any slight culinary inferiorities, and raised La Cathédrale indisputably to the first place. As I cared not a jot what I ate, as long as there was lots of it, and as the Skipper could only eat sharks and hens, and as we both had an eye for the beautiful, we decided without hesitation on La Cathédrale.

The proprietress, a stout elderly lady, richly apparelled in sober silks, greeted us warmly as old and

honoured friends, although until that moment I had never set eyes upon her face. The day being Sunday, she said, all her rooms were very full, but she would assuredly find a little corner for us. When we had taken our seats at a small table for two, and I had glanced around the crowded room, I had the strange feeling of having seen all those same faces before, at the Shelbourne in Dublin, at the Savoy in London and at the Ritz in Paris. The Cavalry were strongly represented, splendid in their beautiful waists, their shiny buttons and gleaming spurs, their brown breeches and their highly polished boots. We, in our oldest "battle clothes," must have made a very shabby contrast with all this bravery; the more so as the Skipper, partly from preference, but chiefly to save his servant trouble, always wore puttees, bronze badges and leather buttons.

Presently, after a longish wait, the celebrated Marguerite herself came up, shook hands with the Skipper, chatted for a few moments, and then asked us what we would order. I looked with much interest at this little waitress whose beauty was praised from one end to the other of the British Army. Undeniably she was dainty, fresh and piquante. Undeniably she was not without looks and was dressed with quiet taste and elegance. But anybody, seeing her in a crowd of English girls and not knowing of her fame, would not have turned to look again. The timid minds of men follow fashion with more certainty than they follow their own tastes. Somehow it had become the fashion to admire Marguerite, and therefore all the Army blindly admired her without further question. Very senior officers leered and ogled in a manner that was highly ludicrous and somewhat

disgusting, while subalterns gazed at her with open, honest, hearty lust. But Marguerite was a wise and discreet little lady who contented herself with her own fair freshness and an average taking in tips of over two hundred francs a day.

Warmed by a bottle of excellent wine we hurried away from lunch to the Opera. On the way we witnessed an imposing spectacle, a formal and ceremonious march of the Iron Corps through Amiens. Little did we think then, as we watched those tough, ruddy, weather-beaten poilus swinging by, that within a few months, and within a few miles of this same gay city, we were going to be so fatefully associated with that famous Corps. There was much about these French that, on the surface, appeared passing shoddy. Their tin hats did not look as if they would stop a pea, their guns looked like children's toys, they marched with conspicuous negligence, and they seemed to have no officers at all. We have, I am told, more officers than men; but the French are a nation of born soldiers. Everything about them, though it may look shoddy, is eminently sound. Those ramshackle guns, the famous '75's, are the finest and fastest shooters in the world; those tin hats are the lightest and the strongest; their system of rations is unrivalled; and when a company relieves in the line, their Captain says, "My children, you will be in such and such a trench at such and such an hour." And each man finds his way there on his own without fail or falter.

We noticed, too, that almost every man wore the Croix de Guerre. With us a soldier may serve well, and more than well, for years, in and out of the line, but, if he has not had the luck to do some showy

deed of gallantry, he goes home on his rare periods of leave still undecorated. Not so the sound and human French. When a battalion commander is satisfied that one of his poilus has, for any length of time, done his common duty well, the man's name is cited in battalion orders, and that poilu becomes forthwith a proud wearer of the war cross.

The opera was "Faust," indifferently well performed. On our arrival we found Tubs and Purple already there. Both were ardent lovers of music. Purple, in his softer moments, sometimes made hissing noises on a flute; and Tubs, in his Oxford days, had, it was feared, composed a valse.

In spite, however, of the mediocrity of the voices and of the acting, the house was closely packed with a mixed and generous audience, in which khaki somewhat preponderated.

When we left the theatre it was already dark.

"Now that there are none of the children about to be led astray by our example, let's go and have a cocktail or two in Charlie's bar!" said the Skipper.

"I think I've had enough alcohol for one day," I replied.

"You needn't worry about alcohol; Charlie doesn't put any in his cocktails—it's much too expensive these days. The secret of his greatness is that he hypnotizes fellows by the seductive way he shakes the mixer into believing that the coloured concoctions, which they swallow at such enormous prices, are the genuine article. Possibly there may be the slightest soupçon of methylated spirits in them, just to confirm the illusion, but that's all. Come along."

Charlie, who to our certain knowledge had been shot at least three times as a spy, stood smilingly

behind his bar, apparently none the worse for these painful experiences. The crowd of hypnotized young officers was so dense that we saw not the faintest chance of being served in under half an hour. Moreover, the atmosphere was foul with hot air and smoke and all unwholesomeness.

"Let's push off before we're gassed," I insisted.

We walked down to "Piccadilly Circus," and then up again, towards the station, along the fashionable and animated street of "Les Trois Cailloux."

Every now and then a little hand was laid lightly on our arm and the word "Capitaine" was breathed, soft and inviting as a caress, into our ear.

The Skipper hated to hurt anyone's feelings. Although he could on occasions be very stern and hard with men, he was invariably gentle and courteous to women, whatever their class, colour or condition; and he now stopped each time to acknowledge these salutations. When I expostulated with him on the ground that he was putting me in a very embarrassing position, he only laughed and said:

"Well, Padre, why shouldn't I talk to them? There are, according to their own lights, some of the most honourable women in the world among that class. If I'd been born a girl, and hopelessly poor, I'd have taken that line myself!"

Perhaps, with the Englishman's horror of sentiment, he spoke like this as a sort of apology for the gentle courtesy with which he treated these women—a courtesy which raised them for a fleeting moment on to that pedestal which might have been their own. But again he probably said it to pull my leg, to draw me. Anyhow, I did not rise to the obvious bait. I took him firmly by the arm.

"You silly old ass, with that face of yours you'd have had a mighty poor clientèle! Come along or we'll miss the train."

The station was full of life and bustle. Alongside one platform stood the Boulogne-Paris express with its variegated throng of civil and military passengers. Alongside the next platform was our train, likewise crowded with all sorts and conditions of humanity. Harold, the Skipper's servant, stood at the door of a first-class carriage, which was already half-filled with French civilians, and in which he had marked down for us two corner seats with a tin hat and a revolver. He had the *Tatler* and the evening papers in his hand. He touched his hat as we arrived.

"Your valises are in the van, sir."

And so, in the manner of a week-end to Brighton, we started off for the trenches.

CHAPTER IX

THE TRENCH PARTY

WITH deep sighs of regret we climbed down out of our comfortable carriage at the shattered station of Peronne, whence, with the aid of our servants and with much slipping and slithering, we humped our valises over about a mile of ice-bound street to the officers' club. The club, as ever, was crowded. Any fellows whom we knew, and who had the unmistakable air of "coming out"—conspicuously light and jaunty in contrast to the meditative air of those "going in"—we plied with questions about our part of the line. Was it pretty quiet? What sort of Boche was up against it? Any talk of raids? Were the dug-outs comfy and—er—deep? And of course we got all sorts of contradictory answers to these questions. People's idea of a quiet bit of line varied widely. Also one man, of a coarse nature, would delight in "putting the wind up" his successors with fantastic stories of the "liveliness," while another, of finer fibre, would, out of the kindness of his heart and an understanding sympathy, give us a more reassuring account. Others again, especially the very young, would, out of mere childish vanity, exaggerate in the wildest manner the dangers they had passed.

"Taking into consideration the fact that all men are liars, and particularly so in the matter of their own battle experiences, I think we may say that our bit of the line sounds fairly peaceful, what?" I remarked.

"I don't like it," answered the Skipper. "I know these heavenly peaceful bits of line. In a few days they become hell. But it doesn't much matter one way or the other, for wherever the Cavalry go in they stir things up at once. It's our bloody-minded, bull-necked generials—'breathing the offensive,' initiative, moral superiority, and all that sort of thing."

"But surely it's sound to get the upper hand?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. You see, there're three ways of life in the trenches. One is the live and let live principle—the ideal one from the soldier's point of view. The second is to take the upper hand, and keep the Boche jumping—warm, but dignified. And the third is to let him get the upper hand and keep you jumping—a wretched, contemptible and dangerous state of affairs. In this last state you can't put your head over the parapet without getting a bullet through it. There's only one thing against the second, the vigorous offensive business, and that is that he always has heavier and more accurate trench mortars than we, and, whereas we pack our front line, he only has two men and a boy in his, so the probability is that, although we do get the upper hand, he gets the bigger bag. Well, we've got to get up at sparrow crack—train goes at half-five, so I'm for beddy byes. Bong soir."

There was nothing of a week-end flavour about our journey the next morning. The day had not dawned, the frost was bitter, the train consisted only

of cattle trucks—the kind that are marked, "horses 10, men 40," which we had all seen on every line before the war, and wondered what on earth was the use of labelling them with the number of men that they could carry, since obviously they could never be used for such a purpose. As we stamped about the floor, blew into our gloves and swung our arms to try and prevent getting frost-bitten, I could not help smiling at an old memory. Once a furiously indignant parent had told me that his son, when taken prisoner, had been sent back in a cattle truck—a cattle truck, sir! It had probably never occurred to the good old man, and to the large class of which he was a type, that *trains de luxe* with Pulman cars and *wagon-lits* are not run right up to the front-line systems, or that when our own men go up they travel as a rule on their flat feet, and only when they are very lucky indeed in cattle trucks like these.

After some hours of Arctic misery we descended from our state coach at the ruins that had once been Roisel. Here we were lucky enough to jump a lorry bound for the small village of Vendelles, in which was situated the unit that we were going to relieve. Our drive lay over a sweep of about eight miles of rolling downs. All this was part of the country from which the enemy had voluntarily withdrawn in the spring of 1917, and consequently his own front line had been chosen and prepared, not fortuitously, according to the fortunes of battle, but with the utmost care and deliberation. We could see it, some miles away to our left, running along the line of a high and gradually ascending ridge which bounded the horizon and dominated all our country-side. The whole scene was typical of a forward area. Every ridge was

gashed along and across with white, irregular lines of trench. The open spaces in front were sown with fields of rusted wire. Under every bank, in every sunken lane, were the kraals of dug-outs, sandbagged shelters and wooden shanties. Among the ruins of every village cowered "baby elephants" and corrugated iron huts. Sinister, deep-voiced guns lurked beneath the shadows of every fold. A thick network of light rails and a finer web of many coloured telephone wires spread out over all the landscape. The jungle grass grew wild and rank. Everywhere rotting sandbags and rusty iron. The sights, the smells, the sounds—the whole aspect, was unspeakably evil and unclean; and it suggested always to me a maniac's unshaven face with livid scars across the cheek.

At the one small cottage of Vendelles that remained standing, we reported to Headquarters. The commander of our Brigade-battalion was a very young and capable Colonel, who was assisted by a Second-in-Command and an Adjutant from his own Regiment, also very young, very capable and very bonhomous officers. The Colonel gave us, off the map, our divisional, brigade, and regimental sectors; told us all the latest intelligence about the Boche; propounded in the minutest detail our somewhat complicated scheme of defence; added that things seemed extraordinarily quiet, but that he feared we were soon to make a noisy raid; insisted, after this bad news, on us having another glass of port, and cordially invited us to stay on to luncheon. Then the Second-in-Command, whose chief function it was to cater for the comforts of the inner man, drew us into intimate confidences about our tastes in meat and drink and our general ideas about the provisioning of a canteen.

He ended by extorting from us every farthing that we had about us, as part payment in anticipation. He usually reckoned, he said, to lose about four hundred francs during a tour in the trenches; but this time he was to lose more than five times that amount, for, while we were in the support line, a "5·9" visited his canteen just after the arrival of the latest lorry's load of goods.

Our Regimental-company was to remain for four days at Vendelles—about three miles behind the front line—in reserve. We were lodged, the officers in one Nissen hut, the sergeants in another, and the men in two huge Adrian huts. Our hut had, of course, several panel boards missing, thereby admitting an eager and a nipping air, as well as vast quantities of snow; but it had a fairly willing stove and was fitted with a long table, two benches and a double tier of sleeping bunks, so on the whole we were well satisfied with our accommodation.

Heavy driving snow was falling when, on the following afternoon, a string of lorries deposited Purple and his frozen legions at our doorstep.

"Do they throw things at us here?" asked Jimmie.

All listened anxiously for the answer. The desirability of a bijou residence in France depends more than anything else on the amount that it is shelled.

"No," answered the Skipper, "they wump Fervacque Farm pretty reg'lar; and they put a good deal of big stuff into Le Verguier and Jeancourt, but so far, touch wood, there's been nothing within a couple of miles of us."

Those four days in reserve passed quietly and quickly by. The inevitable and inexorable Sappers,

of course, scenting new blood from afar, soon swooped down upon us, with the result that most of us spent most of the hours of most of our nights out on working parties. As, however, we went on the unique principle of trying to carry out well and fully all that was asked of us by the Sappers, we always got on excellently well with those proverbially hard taskmasters. Our rule was that, for example's sake, one officer to every twenty men should go; if the party exceeded eighty, the Skipper went with it; if less than eighty and more than forty, Purple went with it. The law that I made unto myself was that I went on alternate nights.

There is no concealing the fact that the men loathed working parties. It is a cruel ordinance of nature that almost all essential things are dull and wearisome, if not actually hateful. The same man who would spend a happy day in making an ornamental border around his billet, or in marking out the regimental crest with small white stones on a mud wall, thought himself the most aggrieved of mortals when required to spend two hours in digging a trench, of which the sole purpose was to save his life.

At this time, too, there was a great difficulty in getting boots. Many men plodded painfully through the mud and snow with practically only socks upon their feet. And the feet of many men became so swollen with frostbite that when once they had taken their boots off they could not get them on again. Nevertheless, owing, I think, in great measure to the example of their officers, the men carried through these working parties with an excellent spirit. They marched away in the darkness and whirling snow, with the Squadroon band of mouth organs and tin

whistles playing lively airs at their head; they knew that they had a big reputation to maintain in the matter of tasks well and quickly done, and growlingly they would maintain it. The leaders of twenty made small bets among themselves as to who should finish first, and themselves worked as heartily with pick and shovel as any private soldier; as, too, did Purple, or the Skipper, whichever happened to be out; and so the time sped swiftly by till the Sapper dismissed us with his blessing, and we turned homewards again to the boiling dixies of soup which we knew were awaiting us.

As nearly all the men were out nearly every night, we started our day at a comparatively late hour. By eleven o'clock huts, rifles, gaspirators and feet had to be ready for inspection, and every man had to be shaved. This insistence on shaving, even in the front line, amounted to almost an obsession with the Skipper. "From the day that a man doesn't shave, his *moral* is gone," he used to say.

After the inspections were over we all turned out for games. The snow lay too deep for football, so we played instead "O'Grady says," "Slap-neck," "Follow-my-Leader," and anything else we could think of. Every now and then an unfortunate man, to the huge amusement of the rest and his own great discomfiture, would disappear over his head in snow into a shell-hole—for shell-holes and craters were of course invisible under the thick carpet of snow—and sometimes it was only with considerable difficulty that we were able to pull him out again.

After dinner the men were encouraged to lay up a reserve of sleep against the rigours of the coming night.

One evening we all went over to the performance of an infantry divisional concert party at a little place called Montigny Farm, a few miles away. We had to walk there through the bitterest of blizzards; but our pains were well repaid. The show was excellent, even to the golden-haired and beautiful leading "lady" who sang touching little love songs in an almost feminine voice, and later took the part of a bewitching barmaid in their somewhat fantastic play. The burden of another song, sung by a dwarfish comedian, I well remember, because of the pathos of his fate:

> "We may all be dead to-morrow,
> But to-night we'll do the duck-board glide."

Poor little creature, *he* never expected to do the duck-board glide, nor to be dead to-morrow; but a few nights later, fortunately just after the performance was over, and all the audience had left, a heavy shell fell into the theatre and killed almost the entire concert party.

That night at the theatre, however, was for us a night of nights. Our usual evening entertainment consisted in sitting as close as possible to the stove, and, amid a shower of coarse jests, rubbing whale oil into our feet.

The Support Line

Owing to the wide view which the enemy had over all our country from the commanding position of his own front line, it was necessary for us to relieve in the dark. Purple and Jimmie had gone on ahead early in the afternoon, Purple to take over trench stores and ammunition, Jimmie to reconnoitre the route, so that he would be able in the dark to guide

us onward from the place where we should have to leave the road. At six o'clock on the evening of the fifth day we set out from the peaceful seclusion of our old tin hut at that funereal relief pace which every young man—who was a man—in Europe knows so well. The support trench, for which we were bound, was about two miles from Vendelles, and ran through the ruined village of Hargicourt, roughly parallel to our own front line and about half a mile in rear of it. We marched with a distance of about fifty yards between platoons, so that no one shell could knock out more than one platoon. Because the feet of most of us were sore and because we were heavy laden, each one carrying on his person his roll of bedding and all the articles of toilet, comfort, and luxury which would have to serve him for the next ten days, we moved exceeding slowly and with many halts. The Skipper, who had got "trench feet" at Cambrai, hobbled painfully but cheerfully along at the head of the column with Hector and me on either side of him.

"This is one of the many times," he said, "when I feel like going down on my knees and thanking Heaven I'm not a Hotchkiss Gunner! Poor devils, they do get a bending, carrying that blasted gun and all the ammunition boxes as well as their own kits and—mind the 'ole!" And he almost came a cropper into a shell-hole, on the roadside.

"Mind the 'ole! Mind the 'ole!" was passed right away back along the column.

Presently, leaving the ruins of Jeancourt behind us, we entered the cavernous mouth of a gloomy valley. As we advanced, the valley became deeper and deeper; the shade of the steep banks on both

sides fell blacker and blacker, until the darkness became so monstrous that we could not only no longer see the white road on which we trod, but not even our own hands in front of us. That valley, it seemed to me, was the fitting portals of madman's land; of the wild region where all that is noblest and all that is most vile in man go with each other side by side; of that weird world, that young man's world, where loves gone wrong, man's ingratitude, debit balances at the bank, the importunities of tradesmen, all life's great little worries, have no place and fly forgotten as a dream.

In the depths of this sombre valley we halted for a few moments to ease our aching shoulders of their burdens and to rest our weary feet. Suddenly, quite close to us, there was a blinding flash and an ear-splitting roar. We all ducked so violently that many tin hats fell clattering on to the road, and I myself was so shaken by the unexpectedness and concussion of the explosion that it was some seconds before I realized it was only one of our own heavy guns that had just fired a few yards away from us.

After this our way began steeply to ascend, the darkness lifted little by little, and soon we could dimly make out objects alongside the road. Before we topped the crest of the rise, which we knew was under the enemy's direct observation, the order "no more smoking, put out your cigarettes!" was quickly passed down the line, and instantly complied with, although not without an oath here and there, as some lad threw away his precious freshly-lighted fag.

Now our road sloped slowly downward again. A mile in front, we saw the everlasting line of lights and the running shadows as they rose and fell. Now

and then the crack of a rifle rang out crisp and clear. Now and then we heard the rapid chatter of our own automatic guns, or the more deliberate tap-tapping of the German weapon. Now and then a great shell bellowed somewhere in the distance. But on the whole all seemed very quiet. We plodded slowly and steadily along until a shadowy figure rose up from the side of the road.

"Hullo, is that the Twelfth Hussars?" asked the voice of Jimmie.

"We cut across here," he told us, after greetings, "along the edge of Cote Copse, and then down into Cote Trench, our trench. It's only about half a mile. No, there's no communicating trench, we go across the open."

We sighed with relief. Nothing is so wearisome as marching any distance along a narrow muddy trench. When we had covered about half of this distance across the open, we scrambled up a steep bank and proceeded along a little deep-worn track which, Jimmie told us, bordered the edge of Cote Copse, though in the dark we could not see the few stumps that only now remained of the copse. We had gone a little way down this track when we heard an ominous sound—the crescendo whistle of a falling crump. The whistle shrieked into a rushing roar. No one needed telling that it was agoing to land very near to us. We crouched as flat as we could. When one has not been under fire for some time the first few shells again are very alarming, though after some minutes of a brisk "hate" it is astonishing how little one minds them. Had this not been our first shelling for over a month, we should probably not have crouched down at all, and some of us would

certainly have been hit. I have often been very frightened, but never, I think, more terrified than during those few seconds. They seemed an eternity. I had a ridiculous idea that the shell was going to land on the back of my neck; and the words of a musical comedy song flitted through my mind:

"Out of all this great big world it's cho-sen me!"

With a sullen roar and a red glare that momentarily showed up all the stumps of the wood as though against a crimson sunset, it burst about twenty yards away. No one was hit. We straightened out and started to move on when another came, nearer this time, and then another and another.

"Files about!" The Skipper passed down. "Get your platoons down close under that bank."

Only a platoon and a half had so far got up over the bank, and these having quickly retraced their steps, the whole Company, with platoons at their proper intervals, hugged the steep hospitable slope while shells fell thick and fast all around the little track up above on which we might now have been, and all the air hummed and whined with the flying fragments.

"It's a proper relief strafe," said Hector. "They must have spotted the track from air photos."

"If it had started five minutes later when we'd all have been strung out on the track, it'd have made a pretty mess of us," commented Jimmie.

After about ten minutes the shelling stopped. We waited another five and then started off afresh; but no sooner had the leading platoon climbed up the bank and got on to the track, than the strafe began again. Again we hurriedly got down under the

bank. The Skipper used the strongest of strong language.

"We'd better push on and chance it," said Jimmie, "they've lifted a bit on to the middle of the Copse now, and they may be searching around about for hours."

"Is there any other way in?"

"Yes, if we follow along under this bank for a bit there's another track—but it's a bit longer, and they might just as well switch off and give that track a doing too."

"They might," agreed the Skipper, "and they might not. Anyhow, if we go this way now we're bound to have a lot of men knocked out, so we'll try the other. Come on, walk march!"

We reached Cote Trench without further mishap. With what we could see, while relieving, of our future home of the next five days, we were by no means favourably impressed. After a long, hard frost, a rapid thaw had set in. The snow had all become slush, the sides of the trench kept falling in in great flakes, as they always do during a thaw, the bottom was knee-deep in clinging mud. There was only one real dug-out of the tunnelled kind, and that was so full of water as to be uninhabitable. Company Headquarters was established in an "inserted baby elephant"; that is to say in a miniature bow hut which had been let into the side of the trench and which was weather but not shell proof. The men were accommodated in little flimsy shelters, cut into the rear slope of the trench by their predecessors, so flimsy that they were no protection even against shrapnel. There had been another "baby elephant" a few yards further up the trench from ours. An officer of another Regiment,

who was then in the front line, had left in it his valise and a case of port, which by some mysterious means he had managed to get up so far. On the afternoon of our arrival a shell had landed right into it, with the result that neither the "baby elephant" nor the kit nor the so precious wine were ever seen again. In this manner Providence delivered us out of the hands of an almost irresistible temptation. The face of that officer when he returned to retrieve his belongings some days later was a sight for sore eyes.

Our period in the support line was full of activity. At night we went out, though less often than when in reserve, on working parties. By day we carried out all the usual inspections, we stood to alarm posts once during the hours of daylight, we rolled up our sleeves and sweated with pick and shovel at trench improvements, although it was more than we could do to clear out the trench as fast as it kept falling in; we took up our Platoon Sergeants to reconnoitre the positions that we should take over in the front line, we made rifle racks and recessess for ammunition, we marched fatigue parties to the R.E. dump to draw gum boots and duck-boards, and we took our turn in conducting the sad little burial parties, with the bodies sewn up in sandbags, to Hargicourt cemetery.

All day the Skipper and Purple sat in the "baby elephant" up to their necks in correspondence, vainly trying to cope with the oceans of paper that flowed in upon us. There were interminable trench standing orders of all kinds from those of the Army downwards that had to be grasped and put into practice; there were defence schemes from the platoon upward that had to be written out by all of us, to make sure that we knew them, and forwarded in triplicate; there

were maps that had to be drawn showing the positions of our gas post and of every sentry, with the orders of each in duplicate; there were situation reports, wind reports, intelligence reports that had to be submitted at short intervals. There were, too, endless lists of trench stores, lists of R.E. requirements, lists of proposed improvements, lists of improvements already carried out, indents innumerable, and, in fine, so much clerical work that Purple, the Skipper and Micky O'Grady were kept writing the whole day and much of the night.

"It gets worse every time we come up!" they complained bitterly.

With the exception of a few "woolly bears" high overhead, and a little harmless shrapnel, the first day passed quietly enough with us. But there was a good deal of heavy crumping around about.

Brigade-battalion H.Q. were particularly unfortunate. They were situated in some spacious huts under the lee of a steep bank about two hundred yards in rear of our trench, where they received so much attention throughout the whole day from 4·2's and 5·9's that they had to abandon their comfortable dwellings and take to the welcome shelter of a forty-foot dug-out, with which, happily, the bank was provided. We listened to the shells coming over, we watched the great black fountains of earth and smoke spurting upwards, and we laughed. War has changed all values, especially the values of humour. We laughed to see our friends being shelled. I have seen men rock with laughter when a shell has pitched in among the enemy and arms and legs and gruesome bits of flesh have hurtled through the air. I have seen men rock with laughter at that most horrible sight of all, when an aeroplane has been hit, when it

dives desperately for land with a plume of thick black smoke streaming out behind, when it bursts suddenly into flame and flies to pieces, when the little black object drops out, and, turning over and over and over, falls faster and faster and faster. Ugh! I sometimes dream of that still. Will the novels, the dramas, the films of the future have to be seasoned, I wonder, to suit this new strong taste?

"Thank the Lord we haven't our own horse guns up with us this time to draw fire," remarked Hector as we watched H.Q. being crumped. "Noisy, yapping little things, they think they're 9·2's and never keep quiet for an instant."

"If we can only keep our blinking idiots in the trench we ought to get off pretty light. I don't think they've spotted we're here yet," said the Skipper.

But nothing is harder than to keep men in a trench half-filled with slime. We had not been shelled, we were three-quarters of a mile behind the front line, and when not under the eye of an officer or N.C.O. men of course, as they always will, walked about on top.

That evening the ten of us lay down to sleep on the muddy floor of our "baby elephant." So small was the space that, once we had fitted ourselves in like a jig-saw puzzle, it was impossible for anyone to move again till we all got up. Presently we awoke with an uneasy feeling. Yes, there was no doubt about it, a "rubber-heels" was having at us!

"Rubber-heels" is any high-velocity gun, so called because the report, the scream of the shell and its explosion, follow on each other so rapidly as to be almost simultaneous. The howitzer is, in his way, a gentleman; he knocks and coughs before he enters a private room. But "rubber-heels" is devoid of all

delicacy. He hits you before you are ready. We surmised that this was a field gun, run close up on a light railway. For about twenty minutes he let us have it as hard and fast as he could lay in. He carried away our chimney and lifted several sandbags off our roof, and he played havoc with a section of our trench. The officers went out to see how their platoons were faring. When they had returned and we had all settled down to try and sleep again, we were badly shaken by Eiffel. His vivid art of imitating shells had become, since he had been gassed at Bourlon, an involuntary habit in his sleep. It came to this, that if he slept no one else could, so, as we were nine to one, we took it in turns for one of us to keep awake and keep him awake—a duty of some danger. Next we were started out of our sleep by a sound as of sawing wood, and a yell from Purple; and we discovered by the light of a torch that a man-eating rat had gnawed away half his hair. This was a pity, as he had so little to start with. Then, after two hours, "rubber-heels" began again, hitting the trench and all around our hut.

"This hut's a hell of a big mark, and a direct hit on it would do us all in—concussion!" remarked some optimist.

"I know," said the Skipper, "and then who'd be left to win the war? I and three other heroes will continue to rough it in here. Purple, Eiffel, and four others will take up their beds and walk elsewhere. Decide among yourselves who goes and who stays."

Now there are few subalterns who do not prefer some comfort and much danger to less danger and no comfort. With one accord they lifted up their voices and protested.

"Oh, damn it all, not to-night, Skipper!"

"Yes, this very mominck."

"But the men have got all the shelters! Where can we go?"

The Skipper showed a callous indifference.

"Are there no picks? Are there no shovels?" he asked, and forthwith seemed to take no further interest in the subject.

As they crawled miserably out into the knee-deep slush, one of them was heard to remark:

"Pity the old Skipper's so windy."

"Tisn't that," said another, "he wants more room!"

It is ever thus that a man is rewarded when, with much pain, he hardens his heart to do what seemeth to him right.

All through the nights at irregular intervals, which was most unhunly of him, "rubber-heels" saluted us with these short, sharp and bloody periods of attention. During these spells of hate, when the telephone wires were cut and we were obviously in trouble, Templeton, the Brigade-battalion Second-in-Command, deemed it his duty, accompanied by the Doctor, to walk across the open to our trench and see how we were getting on. On the second of these journeys the Doctor was knocked out, but Templeton, whose arm was already covered with wound stripes, seemed to bear a charmed life. In all the eventful months that followed, during the black days of March and April, during the thrills and glories of our great advance, it chanced that his Squadron lay nearly always next to ours, and when at last, with the end almost in sight, this very gallant and charming officer was killed, the Squadroon grieved over his loss almost as much as did his own Regiment.

Perhaps during these days Frank was the busiest man of us all, carrying the endless volumes of correspondence to and fro between us and H.Q. He, too, always seemed to choose the times when we were being "rubber-heeled," or they were being crumped, to make his journeys across those two hundred yards of open ground. Slowly, sedately, disdainfully upright he walked, with the shells bursting all around him. But we were not anxious, for we knew that no shell made of mortal man could ever harm our Frank.

Pathos and humour are inseparately blended. One morning when we were packing up to send home the small possessions of the men who had been killed during the night before, we looked in one poor lad's blood-stained pay-book for his next-of-kin's address, and we found that he had written in the space provided for his will, "eny won wot finds ennithink on me e can ave it."

All the locality had soon become unpleasantly lively. Each day was ushered in by the angry barking of "Archies" and the vicious whine of their soaring missiles, as they filled the dim dawn with fleecy puffs of white and black; for that early hour was the favourite time of aerial scouting. When a plane ventured down too low, a furious babel of protest broke out from a myriad automatic guns. Continual area shelling went on throughout the day. Everywhere was raucous noise.

"Isn't it too ludicrously mad!" said the Skipper, as we watched an air fight overhead. "All the great nations of the world living underground, sleeping in their clothes, and playing like naughty children at breaking each other's toys for over three years!"

The great event of our day was the arrival of the

mail. I noticed that none of us wrote many letters while in the line. We felt, I think, that it might be unlucky to write too cheerfully when we never knew what the next minute might bring forth, so for the most part we just didn't write at all till we got back to safety again. But, although we did not write ourselves, we liked while in the line more than at any other time to get letters and parcels; and, when on two evenings running the ration limber with the mail on it was blown to pieces by direct hits on the way up, our fury knew no bounds. It was bad enough losing our rations and our rum, but our letters and parcels as well! That was the limit. What the blinking blink were *our* guns about, we wanted to know; that is *if* we had any! which we began to doubt, as we'd been strafed by the Hun for three days solid, and never a gun of ours had fired! We're a rag-time army, we are! And so on, and so on.

Indeed, the ration limbers had a perilous passage every evening. Usually it is an understood thing between gentlemen that ration strafes are not done. But the Cavalry, having already been in the line eight days, had no doubt made themselves so unpleasant in front that Fritz had forgotten his manners and had retaliated with this dirty blow below the belt.

We used to hear the sound of innumerable wheels in the darkness, as though of an endless column, moving, stealthily, uneasily, as it were, at a walk. Then we heard the arrival of the first few shells; then a clatter of galloping horses and a rattle of flying wheels down the hard high road.

As long as I live the sound of wheeled traffic in the evening will bring back to my mind the ration limbers coming up behind the line; and, when the sound is of

galloping vehicles, it will vividly recall those ration strafes at Hargicourt.

Most of our so-called spare time was occupied in trying to keep our trench from collapsing altogether on top of us, so rapid was its dissolution caused by the heavy thaw. Nevertheless, some of us found time now and again for a little quiet sport. One evening I was slowly making my way along to the "baby elephant," dragging with great difficulty one boot gum after the other up out of the gluey mud, when a torch flashed in my face, there was a shout, "L-l-l-look out!" the flash of a pistol singed my hair, followed by another shout, "G-g-got 'im!" and Eiffel triumphantly held up a monster rat with a bullet through its brain.

On our fourth and last evening in the support trench there came an answer to our indignant demand for retaliation. The heavens behind us opened with great lightnings and a loud, long, rolling peal of thunder; and for half an hour the avenging shells rushed over our heads into Hunland.

"Stuff to give 'em!" we chuckled in delight. "That'll sweeten old rubber-heels!"

But that night "rubber-heels" was more vicious and persistent than ever before; and we looked forward to leaving Cote Trench on the morrow with no regrets, for, although sleep there is scarcely any in the front line, yet there are no working parties, a man has a chance of hitting back, and life there is full of strange and awful excitements.

The Front Line

On the evening of the fifth day we moved according to plan into the front line. As each Platoon Leader

and each Hotchkiss Section Leader had reconnoitred his prospective position therein during the days that we were in support, our relief passed off like clockwork. The trench was too narrow, as indeed most trenches are, to allow of men in full equipment passing each other without the greatest difficulty, so we relieved on the plan that as soon as our men entered by one communicating trench, our predecessors filed out by the other. Just as the last Platoon began to take over, the Hun, having no doubt suspected what was going on, started a brisk little bombardment with trench mortars; but, happily, the deafening devastating "rum jars" were badly aimed, and, passing high over our heads, fell for the most part harmlessly on to the waste space behind us.

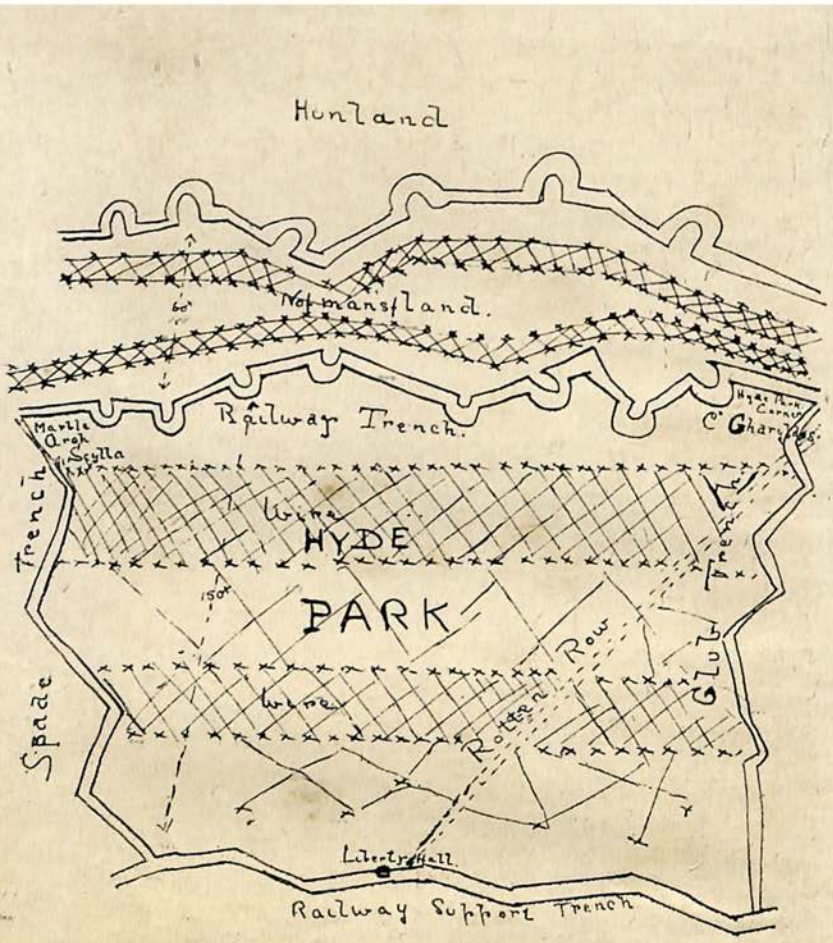
The Skipper and Purple, accompanied by myself, had gone up some hours before our soldiery, in order to see again the positions by daylight, to take over stores, to discuss the situation generally with the outgoing commander and to go through with him the defence schemes of that area.

We had plodded down our old habitation Cote Trench as far as Hargicourt; thence we turned right-handed and walked in the open up the valley of Villeret which, although under cover from the enemy's view, was pitted so closely with shell-holes innumerable that they touched one another, till the whole of the ground resembled the surface of a golf ball. In spite of the heavy burden of our kits we lost no time loitering in that sinister valley of death.

Very fortunately for us, because of the depth and glue-like nature of the mud in them, we were able to get almost the whole way up to our Company Headquarters under cover without having to use the

communicating trenches; and finally, after walking about fifty yards down Railway Support Trench, we came to the little square hole of an entrance in the side of the trench which led steeply down by a staircase of slimy narrow steps to "Liberty Hall," our underground dwelling-place, forty feet below. Near the entrance were the wind indicator, the gas gong, and the gas sentry. A gas-proof blanket was rolled up, like the blinds of a window, over the entrance itself. Down below were several compartments which suggested, more than anything else, cabins in a ship. One compartment, fitted with an upper and lower sleeping bunk, a table, two forms, some bookshelves and a stove, was used as our headquarter mess-room. Another was occupied by the telephone and signallers. Another by the H.Q. Staff and mess servants; and the last and largest by as many as it would hold of the two Platoons in local support. The whole excavation was supported by numerous stout pillars of timber, and, to prevent a gradual falling in of earth, the walls and roofs of each compartment were lined with a thick boarding of a finished workmanship. Nevertheless, well fitted though they were, moisture and earthy slime continually oozed and dripped through the chinks between the boards.

And now at last the time has come when, breaking the firm resolution with which I started this book, I must attempt to draw a map. Here goes. I would here state, however, that I myself am perfectly aware that it is not a good map, having, for instance, no scale, and no north point—minor details which I deliberately ignore, as they tend to confuse the greater issues, to curb the imagination, to betray the designer, and, above all, as they have no bearing whatever on



To face page 150

this portentous narrative. Perhaps then, in order to forestall invidious criticism, I should be better advised to call it a "field sketch." So let it be.

In this field sketch, then, it will be seen that our front line, Railway Trench, was separated from the German front line by about sixty yards of no man's land; that our H.Q. "Liberty Hall," situated in the centre of Railway Support Trench, was separated from our own front line by a space of about a hundred and fifty yards of wired waste, which, in merry jest, we called Hyde Park; that Railway Support Trench was connected with the front line by two communicating trenches, called unimaginatively "Spade Trench" and "Club Trench"; and that Scylla and Charybdis, twin trench motors of which more anon, lurked respectively at the Marble Arch and Hyde Park Corner.

Now at this time Spade Trench and Club Trench were so deep in mud as to be quite impassable. Indeed, in our local defence scheme we had taken the somewhat unorthodox line of leaving them open to the enemy on the principle of fly-paper. When Purple had been going around the positions previous to our taking over, the officer who guided him had protested that it was impossible to walk down Spade Trench. Purple, however, feeling that he ought to see for himself, had insisted on trying. After a few steps his guide had sunk up to the waist in clinging mud from which the united efforts of Purple and himself had been powerless to extricate him. Fortunately, the unhappy officer was wearing boots gum thigh, and, having undone the attachment to his bracer buttons, he was eventually, after nearly an hour's strenuous labour, pulled out of them by five

stalwart men, leaving the boots behind him still completely embedded in the mud—from which we were never able to recover them. Purple was then convinced, and we tried to use those two trenches no more, but followed instead, when it was dark, the tracks that ran alongside each of them.

Through the wire and under cover of some slopes and a slight embankment in Hyde Park we made another track, called Rotten Row, running from our H.Q. through Hyde Park Corner to the extreme right of our front line, along which, with some low stooping here and there, we could get up to Railway Trench totally unobserved, even in broad daylight. It was, of course, soon marked down by the enemy's aircraft, and frequently, at irregular intervals, it received attention from many sorts of guns, from rifle grenades, minenwerfer and low-flying aeroplanes, so that its passage was always fraught with excitement and anxiety. As, however, there were so many craters all along and around it in which we could take instant cover, our casualties on it, considering the persistence with which it was bombarded, were extraordinarily light.

Now a cavalry company consists of six platoons. Our tour in the front line was to be of nearly six days. It was therefore ordained that four platoons should occupy Railway Trench, two platoons Railway Support Trench, for two days at a time, so that in this way each platoon would have, during the six, two days of comparative repose in local support. The officers of the two platoons in local support lived with H.Q. in Liberty Hall. The officers of the platoons in the front line each took turn and turn about with their platoon sergeants of four hours on duty and four hours off

during the twenty-four; and came back to Liberty Hall for their meals when off duty. Theoretically, then, they had twelve out of the twenty-four hours to eat and sleep. Actually, they got no sleep at all and often had to go without their meals, for in the front line a thousand and one unexpected things can happen every hour. Sudden orders to stand to, gas alarms, raids, spells of hate, distinguished visitors, the noise of gunfire and of bursting shells, making arrangements to get away the wounded, the coldness of those winter nights, the continual passing of persons along the narrow trench and the never-ceasing work of keeping the trench from falling in, made sleep on a narrow firing step a thing of great difficulty, a thing possible only to the utterly exhausted.

The Skipper was on duty from evening stand-to till morning stand-down, that is to say from an hour before sunset till full dawn; and Purple was on duty from dawn till sunset. Each during his tour of duty twice visited the line and every sentry—a lengthy proceeding; made up and despatched the reports that fell due during his vigil, answered innumerable questions in code over the telephone, and entertained and supplied with all available information an endless succession of visitors. These visitors and visits were of all kinds, from the stupendously official to the purely social. The Divisional General himself sometimes dropped in, with a cheery word and a keen eye for any neglect of standing orders. Gunners dropped in to discuss the barrage lines and our latest bottle of port. Sappers dropped in to tell us that our trench was in a disgraceful condition and that wiring parties must proceed to function forthwith in no man's land. The Doctor dropped in to argue Sinn Fein and to express

his disgust at our sanitary arrangements. Every day our own Brigade-battalion Colonel dropped in to see how we were getting on, and to tell us the news. Templeton also dropped in every day like a fairy godmother to find out our wants in the matter of food and drink. Intelligence Officers galore dropped in, seeking to suck our brains. Tiny, full of pride and importance in his capacity of Brigade-battalion gas officer, dropped in to prosecute us over our lack of anti-gas arrangements. Officers of the Regiment which in due course would relieve us dropped in for lunch and dinner and personally conducted tours around our area. Friends, relations, those that were an-hungered, people who had lost their way, refugees when a hate was going on up above, once Hector's father—who was doing a political tour of the war zone, and who, incidentally, complained indignantly of the way we wasted bread—once, too, a Staff Officer, and others, too varied and numerous to mention, all dropped in to Liberty Hall.

All through the day there was a continual coming and going up and down our steep narrow stairs, and a continual crowd and chatter in our subterranean cabin; so it can well be imagined that, during the hours of daylight, there was little peace or repose for our headquarter staff. But at night it was different. Then there were no visitors. Purple, wearied by the labours of the day, slept soundly on the upper bunk. One of the two subalterns in local support slept soundly on the lower bunk, and the other slept equally soundly on the floor. The Skipper sat at the table poring over photos and trench maps or wrestling with correspondence by the light of a candle, and I sat by the stove reading the latest war novel, fearfully thrilled by its

descriptions of front-line fighting written by a woman who had never left England. Hector, the Master Bom-ber, was also O.C. Storm Troops. Before coming up to the line he had selected twenty stout men and true, and had carefully trained them in all those arts and wiles of night patrolling by which the unwary Boche might be made a prisoner; and most of the night they lay out in no man's land, stalking their human prey.

At about eleven o'clock on our second night, the Skipper looked up from his maps.

"I'm going around the line now, care to come with me, Padre? It'll save dragging one of the runners around."

There was a standing order that no officer should leave the trench without an armed escort.

"Right-ho!" I replied.

We slipped on our leather jerkins, our revolvers, gaspirators and tin hats, then, grasping our stout trench sticks, we bent double and climbed the forty feet of those shaft-like stairs, tightly holding on with one hand to the rope which, doing duty for bannisters, kept us from slipping down off the steep and slimy steps. Outside, the night was inky black. A gas sentry stood at the entrance, close to where three steps led up out of the trench on to Rotten Row.

"Be careful, sir!" he warned us. "There's a lot of bullets keeps whipping across."

Rotten Row was not more than a foot wide. On both sides and all around was a maze of thorny wire. Screw pickets and odd strands of wire, which tangled our feet and tore our hands, often crossed the track itself. And the darkness was so dense that we could not see a foot in front of us. So, feeling our way yard

by yard, we progressed exceedingly slowly. I confess that this black and lonely wilderness filled me with many tremors. Every now and then an automatic gun from the enemy's trench fired a quick burst, and we bent low as the vicious bullets hissed over. The double report of a rifle aimed towards you is particularly brutal; it cracks hard and sharp like a smack in the face. I could not help thinking how little this path was used at nights, and that, if we were wounded, we might lie there writhing in agony and mud for hours and hours. It was not impossible, too, that Boche patrols, having detected Rotten Row from air photos, could have slipped between the rifle posts in our front line, could have cut and crawled a way through the wire and could be laying up in wait for passers-by. The thought sent shivers down my already chilled spine. But we reached Hyde Park Corner without mishap. Our eyes having now become more accustomed to the gloom, we made out there the Trench Mortar Officer on a visit to Charybdis. We had early gained the ascendency over this dispenser of unpopular thunders by a judicious mixture of hospitality and firmness. The Skipper shook a playful fist at him.

"Don't you dare shoot off those damn little pop-guns in my area without orders from me!" he said.

Our system, by agreement with our gunners, was that if the Boche tried to strafe us we let him have it back with every possible means at our disposal, bombs, grenades, crumps, whizz-bangs and these trench mortars, for about twice as long as he had strafed us. But we sternly discouraged individual and promiscuous efforts on the part of Scylla and Charybdis, as the Boche then replied with trench mortars more than

twice as heavy, which played great havoc with our trench and inflicted many casualties. The Trench Mortar Officer laughingly assured us he would not think of doing such a thing. But occasionally the sergeants in charge of the mortars, from devilment or ennui, fired a round or two on their own, with the result that in a few minutes a vehement and bloody hate of all weapons would be raging.

Some yards further down from Hyde Park Corner we entered the extreme right of our sector of Railway Trench.

"Halt! who goes there?" came a low-voiced challenge through the gloom.

We gave the countersign and were permitted to pass. By dint of unceasing labour this trench had been kept in passing good condition. In places the duck-boards floated on water that welled up faster than it could be pumped out; in places there had been recent slips of earth and sandbags, but on the whole the bottom was sound and narrow, the firing step firm and the sides adequately revetted.

Now trenches in France are not straight, but, following the contours of the ground or the fluctuations of a battle, zigzag about in the most irregular manner, and they are manned, not along the whole length—for that would require innumerable hosts—but at intervals only, by numbers of rifle and automatic gun posts, so placed that the cross-fire from two or more posts covers all ground over which the enemy could possibly advance.

At every post a sentry stood on guard, peering out over the parapet into the shadows of no man's land, while the remainder, who were not employed on fatigue, patrol, wiring or listening post, tried to sleep

on the firing step. After giving the countersign at each post the Skipper stepped up alongside its sentry and chatted with him in low tones for a few moments. I noticed particularly how few lights were being fired up from the trench, which is generally a sign of steady nerves, as is, conversely, a multitude of lights the sign of "wind." The Cavalry had had comparatively few casualties during the past two years. Our party consisted mostly of men who were well used to war, old regular soldiers and volunteers of the first hundred thousand, all good men and true, confident in their officers, confident in their sterling N.C.O.'s, fully confident in themselves, so it was only natural that they should be calm and steady. As we walked along the trench from post to post I could feel this strong and quiet confidence in the air, and the Boche could feel it too, for he was becoming more and more nervous, sending up a profusion of lights and continually open-wild bursts of rapid fire. The bullets smacked into the sandbags of our parapet or went hissing and humming about the wires of Hyde Park, while we, in the deep security of our trench, chuckled at this vain exhibition of fear and fury.

At one post we found all six men standing on the firing step alongside the sentry, staring fixedly into the darkness, which was grotesquely illuminated at frequent intervals by the enemy's lights. Opposite to this post was, we knew from air photos and from cautious observation through telescope by day, a narrow gap in the enemy's wire with a distinct track through it, which was clearly used as an exit by their wiring parties and their night patrols. And now in a wide half-circle around the exit, with blackened hands and faces, patiently waiting for their prey, lay Hector

and his Storm Troops. The Boche, however, was suspicious; he had heard movement, he had seen sinister shadows; he rained his lights lower and faster and he swept all the ground around with traversing fire. Then we heard the ringing burst of bombs, and, knowing that no Boche would venture out that night, we earnestly wished that the Storm Troops were all safe back again. For half an hour or more we, too, stood watching. I found myself wondering if Hector would ever make another century at Lord's; it seemed such a very far cry from this diabolical man-hunting in chaos to the fresh green turf of English June. Then we continued on our round. Along towards the left things were more quiet. We came upon Jimmie at one of his posts with all hands except the sentry hard at work repairing a traverse that had been blown in during the evening by a minenwerfer bomb. Further along still, on our extreme left, Eiffel, with all his available men, was out in front, repairing the damage done to his wire by that same evening's hate. In front of this wiring party, again, lay a covering party, whose duty it was to prevent the wirers being surprised and rushed while unarmed and busied at their work. We climbed out of the trench and through the first belt of wire to see how they were getting on. This was the first time I had ever been in no man's land, and I felt something of a hero as I stood up and looked across to where, a few yards away, I pictured the Germans cowering in their trench.

At this moment a man who was softly tapping in a picket made a bad shot in the dark and hit the fingers of the man holding it for him. The injured man let out a roar of pain and a volley of blasphemy loud enough to awaken the dead. Instantly a machine-

gun opposite opened fire. I sprang into a large mine crater a yard or two away. My right arm sunk up to the shoulder and half my face in a soft woozy substance like a *soufflé*. Hastily drawing it out, I began to slide down the side of the crater and clutched wildly in the dark. My hand again slipped along some inches of slime, and then, sinking through it, closed on something hard and stick-like. Grasping this firmly I checked my descent for a moment, then my support gave way, and I rolled to the bottom of the crater with the lower part of a human leg in my hand. The stench was so horrible that I was violently sick. I have observed before that war has played strange pranks with the quality of humour. As we walked back along the track that skirted Spade Trench the Skipper laughed immoderately at my unhappy plight, and when we got back to Liberty Hall he woke up Purple and the other two that they might not miss the fun of seeing me covered with this green and nauseating slime that had once been the flesh and blood of a living man.

Lunch was the time of our greatest relaxation and sociability. We and the Boche lunched at much about the same hour, and at that time the war was generally at a standstill; at that time, the greatest number of officers being off duty, we were at our brightest and our best; and at that time Liberty Hall was most crowded with a medley of light-hearted visitors. The walls of our dug-out were of course adorned with the drawings of Kirchner and with other suggestive types of feminine beauty extracted from recent numbers of the *Tatler* and the *Sketch*, all of which furnished plentiful matter for conversation and *badinage*. But our favourite theme, when not talking shop

or military gossip, was the meals we were going to have when we got back to Armeens; the real long steaming hot bath in which we were going to wallow and soak and soak; and above all the heavenly prospect, after not having had our clothes off for weeks, of sleeping again in pyjamas, between snowy sheets in the deliciously soft and downy warmth of a real bed.

As in back billets there was sometimes a certain amount of rough horse-play, as, for instance, when Hector wanted to wake anybody, he fired his revolver into the ceiling. I myself spent a good deal of the daytime in our observation post, watching the life and movement behind the German lines. It was strangely fascinating to watch those men whom we were trying to kill, and who were trying to kill us, going peaceably about their daily round in the same way that we were going about ours. Between us and them there was none of that vehemently bitter hatred with which the people and the press at home were overflowing. Indeed, by day, certain understood courtesies existed between us. Owing to the state of the communicating trenches their ration parties had to move along the top for some distance, fully exposed to our fire; but we allowed them to go on their way unmolested. Again, in full daylight, one of our aeroplanes crashed on to the highest part of Hyde Park, not more than a hundred and fifty yards away from scores of their machine-guns; and when we went out with a stretcher to bring in the remains of the poor boy who had been its pilot, although they could have blotted us out in an instant, they fired no shot. But at sunset such amenities ceased and, throughout the hours of darkness, both sides bent all

their energies to the grim business of outwitting and killing each other.

One night Jimmie had a perilous adventure. Certain sounds by night and certain observations through his glasses by day had led him to suspect that enemy's patrols came out through a gap opposite to his sector. Accompanied by Corporal Gregson, by his own first servant, Jackson, and one other man, he crawled out through our wire and across the intervening forty yards to investigate the matter at its source. The night was exceptionally dark, and, slightly losing their direction, they came unexpectedly on to the enemy's wire, where their movements were heard by a sentry. Rifles and automatic guns immediately opened fire on them, and soon a bomb, bursting right in their midst, shattered Jackson's thigh and wounded Corporal Gregson in the arm. Crawling prone, so as not to be seen by the light of the rockets that were falling and flickering all around them, they dragged Jackson into the nearest shell-hole. This was full of icy slush, but they had to stay in it several hours, because each time they tried to drag along the suffering man, his groans were heard, and the bombs and bullets again hailed thick and fast around them. At last, fearing to be overtaken by daylight, they resolved to risk it. They bound a handkerchief over Jackson's mouth to muffle the cries he could not repress, and very slowly and cautiously dragged him back to our trench under a continuous fire. The journey took over an hour, during which time Gregson was again slightly wounded and Jimmie had a small piece of flesh chipped out of his shoulder. Having again very naturally lost direction, for nothing is harder than

to steer a straight course in no man's land, even under the most favourable circumstances, they missed the gap in our wire and narrowly escaped being shot by one of our own Hotchkiss Guns.

On our last night in the front line I again accompanied the Skipper on his round. I could not help noticing that four sleepless days and nights of continual strain had told their tale even on our hardened men. They were less calm than at first; more lights were going up; sentries saw things; rifles and Hotchkiss Guns were continually cracking. Indeed, I have often wondered how a sentry of sensitive nerves and lively imagination ever keeps his reason. I myself could never bear to look over the parapet for any length of time. The hiss of the fleeting bullets upset me; the weird running shadows cast by wire pickets as the lights rose and fell assumed grotesque and fearful shapes; the corpses moved; the darkness became full of sinister sounds; and soon it would seem to me that all the chaos teemed with a myriad unimaginable and fantastic terrors; and I would hastily and shudderingly step down off the firing step again.

As we plodded through the mud between two posts we heard a curious and familiar sound. Away back behind, one of our "heavies" had the unpleasant habit of firing short, and periodically the faulty shells fell round about our line. Up in the air we now heard the wobbling gobbling noise of one of these miscarriages descending upon us. It pitched into Hyde Park with a loud explosion, and the nearest sentry exclaimed with bitter scorn:

"That shell was made by a blinking Duchess!"

When we had gone the whole length of the trench

we sat down for some time on the parados to rest, as the Skipper was tired out.

"I wonder," he said, "how many of those rotting corpses out there and all over France and Flanders would be living men to-day if officers had always known their job and taken the trouble to do it? Hundreds of thousands, I dare say. Isn't it insane," he went on, "to think that this ditch we're in, this lair of human beasts, is over four hundred miles long, and that nearly two hundred of it is England?"

"It's a good thing in one way," I answered, "for now that all the young men of Europe have been through it they'll take jolly good care there won't be any more wars."

"I don't know," he answered reflectively. "These lads in the front line who bear all the pain and see all the horrors are mostly baby officers and working men, men who have little or no stake and little or no voice in the country they give so much to save—little to look forward to when they go back to the country they have saved, except to pay off the cost of the war by the labour of their hands. To those others, away back behind there, war is in most cases a pleasant and profitable joy-ride. But these lads here, who bear the heat and burden of the day—will it be remembered afterwards what they have done? Will they demand a reckoning? I should greatly like to live it through, because after the war things will be so intensely interesting. I often wonder if human minds will be big enough to cope with all the gigantic problems that must arise. I know I should be very sorry to be a member of the Peace Ministry that will have to deal with them!"

When we got back to Liberty Hall, weary and

with nerves on edge, we found a pile of correspondence on the table. Among this was a printed pamphlet, to which was pinned a slip of paper from the Brigade-battalion Adjutant inscribed with the inspiriting words, "A little light literature to cheer you up, dearie." The Skipper read it through without a word and handed it to me. It emanated from a very High Commander. Full of sounding sentences, and pitched in a high key of patriotism, it told us that a mighty German offensive was imminent; that blood would flow like water; that, though we must die, England would be saved and our widows would live to marry again; that of course the front line would go and the second line would go, but what of it? And it concluded with the assurance that this High Commander felt fully confident that we should not fail him in our hour of trial. I laid it down on the table again with a trembling and clammy hand. The Skipper looked me in the eye.

"The front line will go and the second line will go, but what of it?" he quoted. "You notice, too, that it has 'to be communicated to all ranks and the attached certificate to that effect signed and returned without delay'?"

I nodded.

"Of course," he said, "the cove who wrote this can't ever have spent one day, much less four nights, in the front line, and he can't be expected to know. You might just as well suddenly wake up a child in the middle of a dark night, shout in his ear that the Bogy Man is in the room and rush out again slamming the door behind you—and then be surprised when at the slightest sound he jumps out of bed and runs downstairs to light and company. Let's see,

we've got one more day to do now, and then another full tour of reserve, support and front line—thirteen more days in all in the front system. And we're dealing with men, not supermen. Not a word of this to the children, Padre. Here goes for perjuring my soul!" He signed the certificate, and then, tearing the pamphlet into tiny pieces, carefully put them in the stove.

I lay down on the Skipper's bunk with an intense longing to get away from the front line. All through the remainder of the night I tossed feverishly about, my sleep broken by terrible dreams of the mighty offensive which might start that very dawn, dreams of the sudden red deluge, of innumerable men in grey rushing in upon us, of liquid fire and bombs being thrown down into our dug-out, of the earth crashing in and burying us alive; and I longed for the daylight as I have never longed before.

CHAPTER X

THE DEVASTATED AREA

IT befell, however, that we did not accomplish the full number of those thirteen days, for after two days only of our second tour in reserve the whole of the Cavalry were withdrawn from the line. Now whenever we had passed through any period of tension and peril, and when we first found ourselves back in safety, no matter how great our weariness or how many and how dear the friends we might have left behind us, we were always seized with a strong feeling of exhilaration. The dark cloud of the coming offensive now vanished like an evil dream from our minds, and we turned our faces again towards Armeens, where a night had to be spent on the way back to our horses, in the very highest of high spirits.

The joyous occasion was made all the more joyous by a great and happy event. Jimmie had been awarded the Military Cross: and this honour we were going to celebrate to the utmost with all proper form and ceremony by a carefully-thought-out dinner at the Savoy. D.R.L.S. letters and telegrams sped to the absent members of the Squadroon, summoning them to the "conference." As those two most rapid means of communication, the D.R.L.S. and the

telegraph, might only be used for official work, and on no account for private messages, quite an amazing number of military "conferences" took place at popular hotels and restaurants all over France. Tubs was gathered in from R.H.Q. Tiny was retrieved from the gasworks. Dano, Sam'l the Silent and the others who had been left behind with the horses, rode gaily in to Armeens to meet us at the festal board. After a long, slow and bitterly cold journey from Roisel, the Skipper and I put up at the Hôtel de la Concorde. The hotel was as usual very full, and we shared a large double room and a bathroom. The number, I remember it still, was 19; and I remember, too, our joy, as we went in with the mud of nearly three weeks on our clothes, at the sight of the snowy beds, and at the music of the running water in the bathroom.

"I wonder, if we live through the war, shall we remember in the years to come that once an ordinary bed and a bath were the greatest joys that life could hold?" I remarked sententiously.

But the Skipper was not in the mood for higher philosophy. He was in too great a hurry, for reasons I need not mention, to get off his clothes.

"I mean to take strong action with this local unrest!" he said, as he disappeared into the bathroom, armed with many kinds of disinfectant soap and a revolver. "If they try to swim for the shore I shall shoot 'em."

At length, cleanly clothed and refreshed beyond all belief by our ablutions, we sauntered down the gaily animated street of the "Three Pebbles," among the bright lights and welcome sights and sounds of civilization, to our glittering table at the Savoy.

Tubs, the artistic, had done the flowers; Hector had ordered the wines, Eiffel the liqueurs; Purple had selected the cigarettes, Dano the cigars; and we had all taken a share in ordering the food, each one insisting on those things which pleased his own palate best. The dinner, therefore, replete with innumerable courses, full of merriment and mild riotousness, was a long-drawn-out affair, special permission having been obtained from the A.P.M. to prolong our sitting beyond the ordinary closing time of half-past nine; and the night was far spent when I guided the Skipper's somewhat faltering footsteps homeward to our hotel.

The following morning the Skipper announced his intention of going to High Mass in the beautiful old cathedral of Amiens. The cathedral was of course Roman Catholic, but I accompanied him without protest, because I knew that, although the most unmusical of men, he greatly loved music, and I knew, too, that he was a deeply religious man of the order which believes that all roads that lead to God are good. It was all one to him where he poured out his whole soul in gratitude for the joys of this wonderful life and for the strength which still enabled him to endure. The Anglican minster, the Roman cathedral, the Dissenters' chapel, the Muhammadan mosque, the Hindu mandar, the Pagan pagoda, the rolling ocean, the sweet woods of springtime, the dying glory of the autumn, the jewelled wastes of winter snow, the crumbling trench, the saddle of his galloping horse, were all to him the temple of an ever-present and all-loving Divinity. And I, too, was somewhat of this way of thinking.

We looked forward on getting back to our billets

to some more quiet sport in the form of rough shooting and hare-hunting. But this was not to be, for within a few days of our return we got our marching orders for the "devastated area." After the amenities of Armeens most of us were naturally not pleased at the prospect, but we tried to console ourselves with the two important facts that, as no "civvies" lived in those parts, shooting was positively permitted by the authorities, and that, as no "civvies" lived in those parts, our lives would no longer be a burden to us by the everlasting disputation over claims.

Our march was of two days only. On the night of the first we halted at the quaint little village of Harbonnieres, which, after many eventful and critical months, we were to help in recapturing from the Germans; and the following day, crossing the Somme at Brie, we followed its right bank for about a mile till we reached our billets in all that remained of St. Christ-en-Brios.

Our habitation and our manner of life here were entirely different to any that we had ever known before. The village had been situated on the brow and slopes of a steep cliff which dominated the main stream of the river and a wide expanse of reedy, willow-studded fen. Corrugated iron sheds had already been erected as stabling for the horses. Each shed covered about fifty horses. The men lived in a collection of irregular, untidy, squalid little shelters which had been made by their predecessors and which very strongly suggested an Indian bazaar. The Squadroon were billeted in the battered remains of a small house. In one tiny room, which barely contained a wire frame bunk, and a ration box for dressing-table, was lodged the Skipper. In another,

slightly larger, were lodged Purple and myself; and in the third and largest the remainder of our great Leaders had their being. There were gaping holes in the roof and walls, made of course by mice, which, together with the window holes, were carefully screened with sacking, so that no faintest gleam of light could be seen by the hostile bombing squadrons that came raiding down the river valley whenever the nights were clear.

Our domestic arrangements, then, were primitively simple; our bed-clothes consisted of horse blankets and our overcoats; and we washed in canvas water-buckets. For the first time, too, for many years, as the whole Regiment was confined within so small a space, we did not have separate squadron messes, but all the officers of the Regiment lived in one regimental mess. The building consisted of three large rooms for office, lounge and card rooms, and one long bow hut for dining-room. This arrangement, which was by no means welcomed at first by the gregarious Squadroon, had many advantages. Manners improved, messing was cheaper, comforts were greater, and, best of all, officers of different Squadrons but of the same Regiment, who had hitherto been almost strangers, now for the first time grew to know and appreciate one another.

All that country formed part of the area from which the Germans had voluntarily withdrawn in the spring of 1917. The exposed parts of the village must have suffered terrible bombardment, so much so that we could only locate the site of its church by the map and by a few fragments of sacred statuary among the rubble and litter on the highest portion of the cliff. A few houses in the more sheltered quarter, still

standing almost intact among the ruins, strongly tempted the adventurous; but these we were strictly forbidden to enter, as they were believed to have been cunningly mined by the departing Boche, and were conspicuously labelled as such in large black letters on a broad background of whitewash. A vast trench system, which had probably been the German second line while their first had faced the French at Vermandovilliers, ran almost through our billets.

I found it strangely fascinating to live in the same houses in which a few months before our enemies had lived, and to explore the dug-outs and to walk the trenches in which a few months before they, too, had walked and fought. On the first few evenings in our new quarters Eddie, the Skipper, Jimmie and I went on many of such interesting and instructive voyages of discovery. By carefully studying the siting of their abandoned gun-pits, machine-gun posts and support trenches, we learned many lessons in the German method of warfare which afterwards served us in good stead. We were greatly struck, too, by the immense number of dug-outs with which every sunken lane, every trench and every copse was honeycombed, as well as by the depth and thoroughness of their construction. Armed with our electric torches, it amused us much to explore these subterranean lairs, in which we found all sorts of interesting souvenirs and quantities of handsome furniture, stoves and other things that were of great use to us in our desolate habitation.

Jimmie especially delighted in these explorations. With his eyes ablaze in his keen, eager little face, and his whiskers all aquiver like a trench rat, he dived down one deep dark hole after another in the hope of

adding to his celebrated collection of German bombs; which perilous penchant we vainly tried to discourage. This, however, we did sternly insist on, that when laden with his new-found trophies he should keep a distance of at least fifty yards from us. Wherever a tree stood out taller than its fellows, we knew that we should find in it an observation post; and when we climbed the rope ladder or the steps nailed into the trunk that led up to the airy eagle's nest aloft, we thrilled with boyish feelings of adventure scarcely felt since reading "The Swiss Family Robinson" in the days of our earliest childhood.

Another pursuit, that sounds somewhat morbid, we found full of interest. This was to examine the scattered wooden crosses and the little field cemeteries that were thickly dotted about the surrounding country. Contrary to the general belief, the German pays high respect to the bodies of the fallen. His wooden crosses, though in my opinion not so dignified, are larger far and more elaborately worked than are ours. I especially never tired of reading on them the little stories of the dead men down below, their regiments, ranks, the date of their deaths; and I never tired of wondering what their lives had been, in what actions they had fought, what they thought about the war and how they had come to meet their end. One grave, the grave of "tapferer Johann Kältische," far away from any others, was under the observation post in a towering tree, and we long speculated whether the dead soldier had been shot while on vigil up aloft, or whether he had not fallen off the ladder on his way up or down. Although the German language is hideous beyond all other human sounds, yet the wording on these crosses had often a

stately resonance; and once we could not help being touched when, in the midst of a wide solitude, we came upon a handsome cross inscribed with the simple words:

Hier ruht in Gott
Ein unbekanntor Englischer Held,

which means:

Here rests in God
An unknown English hero.

Altogether we passed a happy month in the madman's land of St. Christ-en-Brios. The mornings and the afternoons were filled with strenuous training. All had now been told a thousand times that the great offensive would burst upon us as soon as the winter broke; but as is ever the way with impending disaster, as indeed was the way with the war itself, the more we were warned, the less impression it made upon our minds and the more sceptical we became. Our training schemes, to which these old battlefields were eminently suited, were all on the one theme. The enemy had broken through our front line; our Cavalry hurried up to counter-attack and to stem his advance till the arrival of Infantry in lorries. It is a nice point for speculation whether, if in the beginning of the offensive the Cavalry had been used in this way, in which they had been so carefully trained, instead of as infantry until partially destroyed, the story of March might not have been painted in different colours. These schemes, which in that country tested to their utmost resources the capacity and initiative of Troops Leaders, exercised also all our wits in devising the most rapid and effective expedients for ramping trenches and clearing a way

through the wire. In other days all our schemes had been that our Infantry had made a gap in the enemy's line, and that our Cavalry passed through this gap and on into Hunland beyond. The sinister significance of this change to the defensive was by no means lost upon us, but, as is the way with young Britons while the danger is still unseen, we attributed the implied apprehension almost entirely to "wind."

A great deal of time, too, was spent in the uncongenial task of digging bomb-proof traverses around the stables and around every shelter. So far no bomb had fallen in our billets. We prayed that one would, for than that there is no sharper incentive to the wearsome work of self-protection. Another and more congenial work went on apace. Both the Skipper and William Henry had minds of extraordinary creativeness. William Henry's conceptions, vigorous and practical, though deeply tinctured with eye-wash, were limited to the capacity of his own two hands. The Skipper, who could put his own two hands to no practical use, had an imagination that hewed statues out of mountains. The soundly balanced mind of Purple maintained an even temper between the two. Scrounging parties went out in all directions; the country was scoured; old German dug-outs, trenchments and hutments were ransacked; cellars and ruins were rifled; day after day the Squadroon waggon returned heavy laden with precious material. Soon, on every foot of available space within our dominion, there arose, not the brilliant flag and flagstaff which William Henry had designed, not the marble halls and fairy palaces of which the Skipper had dreamed, but a collection of many kinds of well-built sheds, which added immeasurably to the

health and happiness of the men. The shelters were enlarged and improved. Saddle rooms and armouries were erected. A commodious bathing shed was accomplished. The construction of a great field oven and a great field boiler increased the contentment of the inner man. A huge ruined Adrian hut was transformed into four stately chambers, to wit, a grand dining-hall, a corporals' mess, a warm and comfortable library, and a well-stocked recreation room with the canteen bar, made by the skilful hands of William Henry himself, and ingeniously lighted by a patent of our own, seductively established athwart its furtherest corner.

As all these public works, in addition to the long hours of training, kept the men fully employed, it follows that they were very happy. But, in spite of all these activities, we were not without lighter recreation. While we were in these billets, the Cavalry Corps football tournament began. It could not have had a better place. Each Brigade was contained within a very small area; Brigades were close to each other; excellent grounds existed in every Brigade. Consequently, enormous crowds attended every match and the excitement and enthusiasm were tremendous. The Squadroon, having been defeated in the finals of the previous year, was determined to win it this year. Sam'l the Silent, swift, cool, irresistible, led the team at centre forward. Corkran, paragon of mess waiters, with a finical nimbleness of foot that exasperated the foe and sometimes his own side beyond endurance, played at right inside. Jim Samson, the Skipper's groom and the idol of the shouting populace, played a highly dramatic game on the left wing. Corporal Gregson, now recovered from

his wounds, did strong unostentatious work at centre half; and Hector, making up in force and resolution for anything that was wanting of speed to his gigantic stature, proved himself a tower of strength at back. It so happened that in the first round we met the favourites, the victors of the year before. On three separate occasions, after playing extra time, the match was drawn. The excitement was intense. The supporters of either side, numbering several hundreds, shouted themselves hoarse, waved flags, beat tin cans, exchanged poignant witticisms, screamed advice and encouragement to the players, clamorously claimed imaginary fouls, baited the referee and behaved generally as football crowds do behave. At last, after extra time again in the fourth game, after a long-drawn-out and almost intolerable agony of suspense to us of the Squadroon, our team shot the winning goal. And at that stage the tournament came to a sudden end; for a greater game began.

Pleasurable also was the sport we had on the marshes of the Somme and on the surrounding fens. These teemed with duck and teal. We had made friends with a detachment of Sappers in charge of the pontoon bridge, who often lent us a flat-bottomed boat in which we stalked through the rushes, or rowed off to the islands to lie in wait for flighting birds. But although the game was so plentiful and we fired many cartridges, our bags were small, for the birds were very wild and wary. Nevertheless, these shooting expeditions at sunset gave us much amusement.

During our sojourn in that devastated land we had one strange adventure. Above thirty German prisoners escaped from a cage some miles away, and the Squadroon was sent to round them up. We were

told at the outset that, owing to the innumerable dug-outs, the interminable length of trenches, and the fact that we could move only on the roads, our task was regarded as hopeless. Nevertheless, we set gaily forth, determined to do our best. As inter-communication in that impassable country was so difficult, and as the area to be searched was so large, we moved on a carefully worked-out plan, a plan which it would be tedious to set down here. I accompanied the Skipper at the head of the support Troop. In one place, with the Troop carefully concealed, we watched through our glasses a small copse that had just been searched by the Troop ahead. As soon as the last horse of that Troop had disappeared, we saw a man in German uniform come to the edge, and look around. We formed line and galloped around the copse, thrilling with excitement and delight at the prospect of having so soon rounded up our quarry. The copse was not more than fifty yards square. The man vanished inside. For an hour we searched every inch of it, the dug-outs with which it was honeycombed, and all the open country around. But no sign of a German did we see.

Greatly puzzled we rode away; and then, when out of sight, galloped back under cover of a sunken lane to our first position, where we again watched through our glasses. After a few minutes a man came out of the copse, a man who must have been hidden there all the time that we had been searching it. Again we galloped across the intervening space, and this time we caught him. But he was a French civilian, the only civilian, in fact, from our village. The first man had been a German, the second a Frenchman, and, if both these had managed to lie

hidden during our search, it was possible, nay probable, that all the escaped prisoners were hiding there too, in some cleverly concealed dug-out. We could get no information out of our captive. Again we searched the copse, again with no result, and then, sending the Frenchman back to billets under an escort, and leaving a guard to watch the baffling copse, we went on our way. As we advanced, the country became more and more difficult; our progress became slower and slower. Soon we got into the old front system of the Somme, the wildest part of it that I had ever seen. At one bound the war had rolled on from there to the Hindenburg Line. The armies of France had swept over it and on, leaving it behind them, and it was still as they had left it. Here and there were hideously disembowelled factories and machinery, all overgrown with grass. Food, stores, ammunition and unburied dead, still lay plentifully around.

At Fresnes on the borders of this horrid desolation, we met a Salvage Company at work. They told us that we were the first people they had seen since they had been there, and they laughed at our mission. That warren of trenches and dug-outs extended for untold miles, and we might as well look for a needle in a haystack. They warned us, if we insisted on going further in, not to let any men go singly, but only in strong parties, as the Golgotha was peopled with wild men, British, French, Australian, German deserters, who lived there underground, like ghouls among the mouldering dead, and who came out at nights to plunder and to kill. In the night, an officer said, mingled with the snarling of carrion dogs, they often heard inhuman cries and rifle shots coming from that awful wilderness, as though the bestial denizens were

fighting among themselves; and none of the Salvage Company ever ventured beyond the confines of their camp after the sun had set. Once they had put out, as a trap, a basket containing food, tobacco, and a bottle of whisky. But the following morning they found the bait untouched, and a note in the basket, "Nothing doing!"

We proceeded on our way much interested by this queer story. The road got worse and worse, until, at Vermandovilliers, it, the most indestructible of matter, disappeared altogether in the chaos. While waiting here for reports from left to right, we lit a small fire to keep us warm. Shortly after, when night had fallen, a bombing plane passed overhead, and seeing the fire, small as it was, dropped a bomb which burst with a mighty crash and reverberation some forty yards away, but which happily did us no injury. When reports had come from each Troop that they reached their objectives, and had, alas! failed to find the prisoners, we rode dejectedly home. On arrival we learned that sudden orders had come for an early march on the morrow, so the mystery of the copse was never solved.

CHAPTER XI

MARCH

HAVING regretfully left behind the habitation which our own labours had made so comfortable, we made a rapid march to a position of readiness on the extreme right of the British line, nearly opposite to St. Quentin and a few miles away from Noyon. Our new resting-place was a broad, shallow valley, rising on either side and at the western end by tiers of terraces up to dense woods of infinite extent. On these terraces, along the fringes of the forest, so as to escape the notice of hostile aircraft, our horses were picketed in scattered troops, all out in the open air. Down the centre of the valley ran a road leading into, at the valley's mouth, the village of Grandru.

All this country, too, which had been in the enemy's occupation since our original retreat from Mons, had been abandoned by him on his retirement to the Hindenberg Line. But it had been so far behind the fighting front that, although inhabited throughout by line of communication troops, it had entirely escaped the ravages of war. All the male population had indeed been deported, but beyond that one great inconvenience, the villagers had been suffered to go the even tenor of their way. The

houses were intact; the trees uncut, the cattle unrequisitioned. Gardens flourished; poultry was plentiful. The indelicate among us arrived, by an elementary problem in mathematics and biology, at the erroneous conclusion that all the multitude of blue-eyed children of under three could not be wholly French.

The village of Grandru itself was crowded with innumerable headquarters and messes. To the Squadroon's lot fell one cottage of indescribable minuteness and poverty, tenanted by an old lady of indescribable hardness and rapacity. The Skipper had a box-like bunk; Purple, Hector and Tiny, when the table had been cleared after dinner, laid them down to rest on the floor; and the remainder of us slept away up by the horses in a tent. The men, likewise, lived in tents alongside their horses, in ruddy brown tents, believed to be invisible from up above, and further camouflaged with fronds and foliage. Needless to say, the proportion of tents to men was totally inadequate, so the men, as they always loved to do, made for themselves, out of their ground sheets, blankets and branches, little shelters and "bivvies" all along the outskirts of the forest. The sergeants, under the vigorous direction of William Henry, built a solid and spacious mess-house into the perpendicular bank of a terrace. Nature, who in perverseness could have made this alfresco life so wretched, smiled on us in a long succession of balmy blue and golden days.

Our rôle had now changed again. We were no longer cavalry, we were no longer even mounted infantry, we were infanty pure and simple; simple, I say advisedly, because we were neither trained nor equipped for the part. The plan, as we understood it,

was roughly that we were the very last reserve; that, if the enemy broke badly through our line, we were to be hurried up dismounted in lorries to counter-attack him; that, having counter-attacked him, we were to hold him till more men could be combed out of England, or till the French should come up and save us. Englishmen were scarce in those days; how scarce, and how near England was to becoming less than scarce, can never be believed by any who did not live through the tragedy of the next few weeks.

Every moment was now given up to hectic training of a new kind. We pored over an invaluable little pamphlet called, I think, "The Platoon." We organized regiments into companies, squadrons into platoons, troops into sections; and somehow they never seemed to fit, and the organization was changed again from day to day. All this training and all this continual alteration of plan was taken in huge good part by all ranks. None of the younger ones believed yet that the much-talked-of offensive would come off. The Hun would be mad, they said, to waste his strength on the West when he already had Russia at his feet; and meanwhile they regarded the "windiness" of their seniors with good-humoured toleration. Those days of the calm, then, in Grandru, were for us full of argument and happiness. The woods, too, abounded with wild boar, and night after night we spent in the chase. We clipped with wire cutters a large piece off the nose of our service bullets, as the untreated bullet had little effect on that toughest of all animals. Two such clips of soft-nosed bullets we forgetfully left behind in our mess when the time came to leave Grandru with more haste than dignity,

and no doubt they are now exposed in the Berlin War Museum as an example of British barbarity.

In due course we were told definitely that the offensive would break on March 21st. The dismounted party had been told off and completed to the last detail of ammunition and supplies; but still most of us were sceptical, or perhaps inclined to believe that, if the offensive did take place, there was little probability of us, the last reserve, playing any part in it. And so on the eve of the fateful day we sat down to dinner with our usual spirits and appetite, still cheerfully contemptuous of the prevailing "wind," still rather amused at the Skipper's unusual silence and gravity.

"If our people know for certain that the offensive starts to-morrow," we said, "our guns will swamp the Huns with gas just before their zero hour, kill thousands of them and botch up their whole show."

Shortly after four in the morning we were woken up by the sounds of such a bombardment as speedily dispelled from our minds any doubts we still might have had about the coming offensive. The volume and intensity of fire was greater than on the Somme. Our village itself was not shelled, but long guns were at work on all the principal bridges and cross-roads around about. A few hours later orders came for our dismounted party to embark in their lorries for the front forthwith. That is to say that on the first day, within a few hours only of the opening attack, our last reserve was called up. All of us, even those who had been most sceptical, instantly understood what this meant and how grave the situation must be. The dismounted party comprised, with the exception of one man left to every four horses, all the fighting

rank and file of the Regiment. Dano marched at the head of the two platoons from the Squadroon; and we all walked with him to the main road about a mile and a half away, where the long train of lorries were drawn up in waiting. Very rapidly, because we had rehearsed it before, and in spite of the stream of ambulances filled with gassed and wounded coming the other way, the embarkation was carried out, and the flower of the British Cavalry rolled off as infantry in lorries to the red and black horizon. The Colonel, the Second-in-Command, the three Squadron Leaders, all of us standing there on the road waving farewell to our lads, many of whom we should never see again, must have felt some shame at this curious freak of organization which sent the manhood of the Regiment into action under the command of a very young officer indeed, while we seniors remained behind in safety with the horses.

What adventures this dismounted party met with; how, on arriving at the line to which they had been assigned, they found it existed only on the map; how they desperately defended the bank of the St. Quentin Canal in thick mist and against heavy odds; and how the remnants were withdrawn and transformed into Cavalry again, is too long a story for me to set down here.

When the last of the lorries had disappeared in the direction of the smoke and flames and gunfire, the Skipper and I walked sorrowfully back to our billets. Neither of us expected to see any of our lads again. We now packed up all our belongings and prepared to move at a moment's notice. We could hear the roar of battle drawing closer. Every hour brought wild, disquieting rumours. Soon the terrible

pageant of a broken army began to pass before our eyes. One poor Chinaman, who could not steel his heart to throw away his heavy sack of kit, fell down under its weight and died on the road by our billet.

"Alleemandee go ting, ting, ting, Chinaman marchee quick!" were his last words.

On the following day came an urgent demand for a hundred mounted men from our Brigade to join immediately the mounted remains of another Division. The Squadroon was called upon to furnish an officer for this party. All, of course, immediately volunteered, and after the usual three cold hands of poker the lot fell to Jimmie. The vagaries and the exploits of the "last hundred," as we called them, would fill a volume as stirring as anything in fiction. Next we were asked for an officer for a particularly perilous piece of liaison, and this time the cards declared for Hector. On the second day hurried orders came to move the horses back out of the danger zone. As by now there were only about one officer and two other ranks to each Troop, the work of saddling up was one of extreme difficulty. It was, however, accomplished in course of time, and a curious-looking column set out southward with every officer, including the Colonel, leading three horses and some unfortunate men leading as many as four. That was by no means a pleasant march. As we passed through one village a swarm of demoralized, drunken young soldiers, without arms or equipment, shouted foul insults at us. Then we passed out of the British into the French area. We, going backwards, met a steady stream of French troops moving up. They eyed us in silence with bitter looks, or made ironical remarks to each other

as we passed. In the villages old men and women came out of their houses to curse and spit at us; and altogether, though I was leading the horses of three comrades who at that moment were stoutly fighting against overwhelming odds, I had rarely felt more embarrassed than during this our seeming flight through the territory of our Allies. That night we bivouacked under some tall trees on the borders of a marshy stream, each officer watering, feeding, off-saddling and grooming six horses, just the same as did the men. During the night all the neighbourhood was heavily bombed, but without any injury to us. Early in the morning we heard, amongst other shocking news, that all our dismounted party had been blotted out. Numbers of unarmed stragglers from the battle line, who had been rounded up and roughly reorganized, were now handed over to us to help with the horses; but none had ridden before, and when with great difficulty we had at last got them mounted, a counter-order came and they were taken away from us again.

We of the led-horses marched again that day and bivouacked at nightfall in the Forest of Compiègne. We were a somewhat sad little party that, having done the best we could for our horses, lay down to sleep beside them, wrapped in our blankets and with our heads pillowed on our saddles. Next morning came more cheering news. We heard, what few of us believed, that up north the British had made a brilliant counter-stroke, capturing Douai and Lille; and that down south the Americans had made an even more brilliant advance, capturing heaven knows how many prisoners, guns and miles of country. The persistence with which this rumour circulated as

the situation grew darker and more dark was one of the chief wonders of those disastrous days. We learned also, to our great delight, that our dismounted party, though severely handled, had been by no means wiped out; that it had been relieved and was now on the way back to Pontoise; and that the Regiment was to send up twenty-five men, each leading three horses, to meet it and thus to form again out of the remains of the Regiment a mounted Squadron. In this way, the other two Regiments doing the same, a strong composite Regiment was made up out of the Brigade. The Squadroon formed the headquarters of our regimental party. The Skipper, Purple, Eiffel, Sam'l and William Henry all went off with it as well as the remaining officers from the other two Squadrons. Hector, having arrived back from his liaison just after the departure of the "phantom army," as we called it, immediately spurred off in the direction it had gone; but was caught and sternly detained by the Colonel.

Now our situation was this: the dismounted party was away; the "last hundred" were away, where, we had no idea; the "phantom army" had gone up to meet and mount seventy-five of the dismounted party, if so many still remained; and one other party of fifty horses had gone to help mount the Canadian Brigade. With the Regiment then, in the Forest of Compiègne, there remained only R.H.Q. and Staff, practically no men at all, several horses, Hector, Tiny, myself and one officer of another Squadron.

Towards evening Dano, with the surplus over seventy-five of the dismounted party, who had not been mounted and taken on by the "phantom army," weary, battle-stained and footsore, limped into camp.

As soon as these had fed and rested, those that were fit to fight were mounted; a comb-out was made of the echelons and R.H.Q., and another mounted party of about forty men set out under Hector to augment the Skipper's "phantom army."

Although I have not the space to follow the fortunes of these various parties, and to tell the thrilling story of the actions that they fought, I feel I must try to make clear how it came to pass that little scattered bands of horsemen were roving far and wide along the battle line; and how, although these bands fought, often at great distances from each other, under the unhampered command of their own young leaders, all were yet fighting for a common object, and the movements of all were co-ordinated by the one command and Staff which, in all the panic and confusion of those terrible days, never once lost its head, nor lost cool, firm touch with the most remote units under its command.

This is the way that we, uninformed regimental soldiers, appreciated the situation from the evidence of our own eyes and ears. The enemy had made an attack on a front of over fifty miles. The intensity of the opening bombardment had thrown our men out of the first line of trenches. The second line of trenches existed only on the map. On the second day trench warfare had given place to the warfare of movement. In places our Fifth Army fought with a skill and stubbornness that beggars all description. In places it fought well. In most places it did not fight at all. The reason was not far to seek. In 1918 the quality of our recruits was far different from what it had been earlier on. They were either immature boys or men of a class who had held their safety

higher than their honour. Nevertheless, at bottom, they were still of the stout island stuff that will do to the end if only it is told what to do. Our Army had swelled so swiftly to enormous dimensions that it was difficult to find for it that vast number of officers which our system requires; and from carelessness, or perhaps for want of better material, thousands of commissions had been given to men who were totally unfitted for the leadership of their fellows or for the trust of human lives. The training of these new officers had perforce been rapid, and though a few months can perhaps make an officer capable of trench warfare, it takes, whatever popular opinion may say, many years to make an officer capable of open warfare. There are, happily, scores of brilliant exceptions, but we were arguing in general terms.

It is an immutable law of open war that when an officer is ignorant of what to do, he will always go backwards. The German advance was on a front of fifty miles. Wherever our men opposite to him lay down and fired their rifles, he stopped at once and tried to push on somewhere else. And unfortunately he always speedily found a place where none of our men did lie down to fire at him and where he could push on. If all had lain down and fired at him, his offensive might have ended on the second or third day. But by steady tapping all along the line, he soon surrounded the stalwart little bands which here and there held out to the last; and by a cruel irony of fate, these, the bravest and the best, when at last they saw the German signal rockets going up far away behind, telling how hopelessly they were surrounded, were all either killed or captured; while

those others who betrayed them are still gaily telling Blighty how they alone won the war.

At this stage, that is to say at the time of the departure of the "phantom army," the truest hearts of the Fifth Army were either dead or prisoners; and most of the remainder, with, of course, sporadic exceptions, were incapable of further resistance. The Cavalry were on the extreme right of the British line with the French. Between, roughly, Noyon and Amiens, was a large gap where the Fifth Army should have been, and along this front the Germans were advancing practically unopposed, with incredible rapidity. French reserves were coming up by road and rail as fast as possible, but so swift was the enemy's advance that in some places these were attacked while detraining or while still actually in their trains. For the first two days the majority of our Cavalry had been used as infantry in the line. Every moment was now of critical importance. If the enemy could break through that Noyon-Amiens line, he would drive a wedge between the French and the British Armies, he would be able to march straight through to Abbeville, and he would thus put the whole of the British Army in the bag. The instant, therefore, that parties of the Cavalry were withdrawn from the line and mounted again, they were sent to meet the advancing foe and to check him at all costs till the French could come up and take over. Thus it was that these small isolated bodies of Cavalry, led by youngsters, many of whom had fought in a very different kind of retreat from Mons, rode resolutely forward through the broken remnants of an army; fiercely attacked the triumphant enemy wherever met; and then desperately held their ground until

relieved by the blue-grey poilus of Foch. Then they mounted again and rode off ever northward to repeat these tactics until they made their final stand within a few miles of Amiens itself.

During these days we saw things of which it is not good to speak—of which afterwards we never did speak, except late at nights, in the privacy of our own mess.

After two days of bitter fighting near Noyon, in which they faithfully fulfilled their object, the "last hundred" and the "phantom army" were recalled, the Brigade was reorganized as a Brigade, and we marched to the village of Moyenvilliers. Early on the next morning we heard that the enemy was advancing over a ridge only a few miles away. We speedily saddled up, and, as we had practised a thousand times before on Salisbury Plain, on the scorching flats of India, on the South African veld, on the Curragh and on the sands of Paris Plage, we moved out in real Cavalry formation as a whole cavalry brigade. The Colonel rode far ahead with the advanced guard. Squadron Leaders galloped out to him. Squadron Seconds-in-Command galloped out to lead the Squadrons. Troop Leaders galloped out to join their Squadron Seconds-in-Command. This body of rapidly moving horsemen, scattered in little troop columns over a wide expanse of country, so as to escape the full effect of shell-fire, yet moving methodically to a single will, formed a most imposing spectacle. We swept around three villages, whose inhabitants were so startled by our martial air that they instantly seized all that was most precious and portable of their Penates, abandoned their homes, and fled to swell the pitiable multitude of refugees that was already beginning to block the southern roads.

Just beyond these villages was the ridge that we were going to hold. Troop Leaders now galloped up to their Squadron Leaders, who gave them their positions on the ground, so that, on the arrival of their Troops, they were able to lead them straight into action. So far all had gone as on a drill parade. But it takes two sides to make a battle, and nowhere was there a Boche to be seen. Presently we learned that this had been a false alarm; that the enemy was above fourteen miles away, and that he was pushing hard for the Paris railway towards Plainville. To Plainville then we spurred with all speed, but on arrival we found that the enemy had already been checked some miles in advance of it by the French.

In that village we passed the night, a night which, in the midst of the darkest period of my life, was one of the gayest and most cheerful of my life. The village had been evacuated of every human inhabitant, and this so suddenly, that, with the exception of some light valuables, they had been able to take nothing away with them. Poultry abounded in every farmyard; unmilked cows stood lowing piteously in their stalls; pigs, rabbits, eggs, and other delicacies were found in plenty among the outhouses. Granaries groaned under the heavy burden of fat oats. The barns were piled high with sweet-scented hay. In nearly every house were well-stocked cellars of wine and cider. Was there ever such an El Dorado for starving man and beast? If not us, the Boche! As we dug our line along the outskirts of the village, our nostrils were assailed by the delicious fragrance of roasting pork and savoury baking meats. The interior of the houses presented a pathetic spectacle. Drawers, cabinets, boxes stood wide open, their

contents thrown about in wild disorder. Beds and floors were littered with garments and intimate apparel. All was just as the poor sobbing owners, making a frenzied choice of what to take, had left it a few hours before.

Looking back to it now, through the sober medium of peace, our behaviour on that evening appears highly shocking. We had all that the heart of man could desire except light. Oil or candles there were none. "I'll fix that!" said Hector, and he vanished into the church, reappearing a few minutes later with candles enough to last us for a month, including one of at least four feet long. Eiffel always wore a haversack of mysterious and unfathomable capacity, a veritable widow's cruse, containing packs of cards, toilet kit, chocolates, spicy literature, a rabbit or two, perhaps a chicken, and a wealth of curious souvenirs. He now industriously busied himself in filling up its vacant spaces.

We sat down to our sumptuous dinner in hilarious spirits. Our dead lay behind us, to-morrow we might be dead ourselves; we lived only for the moment. There was almost a Christmas-like air about that feast. Our uniforms were muddy and battle-stained beyond belief. Over them Purple wore a bowler hat. Jimmie wore a student's cap of green velvet and gold lace, Tiny wore a woman's beaded bonnet, Sam'l wore a kepi, Dano wore what I believe is called a maternity gown. The Skipper sat at the head of the table in an antiquated tall hat; and when the General came around, forgetting that he was thus hatted, he went out in this incongruous headgear and gravely saluted, to the huge amusement of the onlookers—and to his own great confusion when he received a sharp rebuke

for such indecorous levity. After dinner we thought happily of the comfortable four-poster beds with which we were each accommodated. Hector and Eiffel, who had gone out to their room, presently reappeared arrayed only in filmy feminine "nighties," and the two young giants proceeded to execute a ballet dance around the room in this highly inadequate attire. As, however, we did not know from minute to minute what the next might bring forth, they were sent away to dress again; and we all lay down to sleep on our warm and welcome beds, booted, belted, spurred, and ready for the suddennest of war's alarms.

Next morning we were early on the march again towards Amiens. Our men had been put on their honour in the matter of drink, and, although there was wine enough in the village to intoxicate a whole Division, it was a source of pride to us that, under circumstances so tempting, we had no single case of drunkenness.

During that march we saw a *Daily Mail*. In it, showing our loss of ground in dark shaded lines, was a map, which dispelled any lingering belief we might have had in the mythical counter-stroke up north, or any lingering doubts we might have had as to the immensity of the disaster that had overtaken our arms.

As we looked at the sorry wreckage that streamed along the road, one of our officers remarked:

"We retreated from Mons, but not like this! Look at them, we're beaten! why don't we make peace?"

Long after midnight we reached the hamlet of Cottenchy. A few inhabitants had not as yet been evacuated; and all the available accommodation was reserved for their highnesses the stragglers, so we

picketed our horses in a field and slept on our saddles beside them. Long before dawn we were roused. The men hastily brewed their beloved tea. At all times between us and them was a strong, unspoken affection, but in the line and in times of great danger, this affection grew into a brotherly tenderness; and now each Troop brought us steaming mugs of the stimulating beverage before they touched a mouthful of it themselves.

We learned that the Canadian Brigade, with its usual dash, had started out to attack the Bois de Moreuil, in which the enemy had already gained a footing; and we moved off with all speed to join in the attack. We swept up the next ridge, through bearded, hollow-eyed creatures who, a few weeks before, had been in the habit of insulting us when we passed, and who now added an even greater insult still by cheering us as we rode through them and on to do our simple duty.

The Squadroon was immediately despatched to assist the Canadians in their attack. What befell them there, how they tried and failed to capture a German field gun; how Arthur Jenner won the D.C.M. and Frank the Military Medal, are stories which I have not the time to tell; and how at nightfall, after a fierce, fluctuating battle, the wood was ours, is already a matter of history. Nor was I present in the battle myself. Before it began Eiffel had been sent away as a divisional galloper, Sam'l as a brigade galloper, and I to the dressing station.

Towards three in the morning the Squadroon were relieved and withdrawn to a little village in the valley below. The horses stood saddled up in an orchard, and we made our headquarters in a small cottage close

by. Just as the owners of this cottage had loaded their cart and were leaving their door, a shell had burst right on them, for among the ruins of a cart and the mangled carcases of a pair of horses, we found the broken bodies of two old women and a small boy. Inside was the usual litter and confusion of panic-stricken flight—open drawers, open cupboards, open boxes, clothes scattered all about the floor. The dying embers of a fire still glowed feebly in the grate. Corkran, paragon of mess waiters, and Brown, concocted us a savoury mess of bully stew. We devoured same; we fought over again the battle of the day; we wrote home to say that all was well; and then, just as dawn was breaking, we lay down to rest. The Skipper, Purple and I all slept in the huge and only bed. Tiny slept in a baby's cot, and the remainder got down to it on the floor.

It must have been well on in the afternoon when we had a rude awakening. Heavy shells began to fall in the village. Loud sounds of battle came from the ridge above. While we were rubbing our sleepy eyes, Jim, the Skipper's groom, arrived at the door with his horse.

"You're wanted on the skyline, sir," he said laconically.

"Bring on the Squadroon, Purple," said the Skipper, as he leapt out of bed and galloped away.

As my orders were, I hastened to the dressing station. On the way I could see that the troops who had taken over the wood from us had been attacked and had broken. The enemy was pouring out of the wood and down the slope towards us. Between him and us was a slight dip and then another lower ridge. Up this lower ridge I saw our Brigade galloping,

squadron by squadron, and coming into action on the crest. The whole dismounted Brigade, which now scarcely numbered two hundred rifles, held a line of nearly a mile in length. On the extreme left lay the Squadroon, and on their left the ridge fell sharply downward to a steep valley, which ran, as dead ground, right up to the enemy's wood. Even my unmilitary eye at once grasped the terrible danger of that blind valley, and the fact that we had not the men to hold it. Then the wounded began to arrive, and for the next three or four hours I was too busy stretcher bearing to see what was going on up on the ridge above. Eventually the shelling became so heavy that it was found necessary to remove the dressing station some distance to the north, and I was sent to the led-horses to explain its new position. Twilight was deepening when I found them. Purple and an armourer were trying to repair a broken Hotchkiss Gun.

"How are things going?" I asked anxiously.

"Bad," snapped Purple. "Now you're here you might hold some horses; we're one man to five or six, as it is."

In times of stress he wasted few words. I pressed for details.

"They've beaten off two attacks," he said at last. "This sounds like another beginning."

Indeed, it did. After a lull the gunfire suddenly broke out afresh in growing volume and intensity. Great shells bellowed on to the villages, roads and quarries around. From the ridge came a crash of musketry, rising, falling, now a furious chatter, now dying away altogether, now suddenly swelling to a deafening roar. No weapon in war is so terrible as

musketry. Shells come soaring out of the blue, blindly impersonal, and on the whole do little damage. But rifle-fire is malignantly personal; it tells of men who see each other, battling face to face, individuals filled with fear and fury and the will to kill.

A bitter sleet drove downwards from the north. Holding three horses, I sat huddled under a steep bank, listening miserably to the deadly strife, shivering with cold and fear and pity for my friends above, praying that they might prevail. I would have liked to talk, but it was useless trying to talk to Purple. The other horse holders, too, sat in silence. As suddenly as they had begun the sounds of battle died down. How had it gone? Had we held, I wondered, or was it finished up there, and might any moment the Huns come swarming down upon us? Presently the blood-stained figure of Paddy Donovan reeled up to Purple through the dusk.

"We bate them off again, sorr!" he cried drunkenly, "but the old squadrohn is desthroyed. The Captain says, says he, will yez send up ivry man yer can, even if yer has to let some harses go. The ould Colonel is kilt, God rest his sowl, he was the rale jintleman, and the Major is sthruck forninst the head, and——" and Paddy swooned away.

A few minutes later Frank appeared. Even he was mud-stained and slightly, very slightly, dishevelled. He saluted smartly by bringing his hand with a ringing smack to the small of his rifle.

"The Captain presents his compliments, sir, and will you kindly send up immediately two boxes of ammunition and the anti-aircraft gun if it is working?"

"How did you get on?" I asked.

"I fear we have sustained a considerable number

of casualties, sir, but I think we may say we have broken up the enemy's attacks. He will not attack again to-night."

Purple caught some passers-by in khaki and made them hold horses, thereby releasing eleven men, whom he despatched up to the line with the anti-aircraft gun and the ammunition under the guidance of Frank.

After the tumult of the day an uncanny stillness fell upon the night. Hour after hour we of the led-horses sat in silence with no further news from the line till about three in the morning, when Sam'l came to us. He had escaped from the Brigade, and had been up to visit the Squadroon.

"It turned me sick," he said, "to see them; and the few that are left are done in for want of food. I pinched some tea and rum from the Brigade, and I've got the tea boiling in a dixie in a house just over there. I came to get some one to help me carry it up."

"Go on, Padre," said Purple, and he took over my three horses.

Very slowly and carefully, so as not to fall into shell-holes or to trip over the stiffening bodies that so thickly dotted the slope, we carried our precious fluid up that sinister hill of death. Just as we at last reached the Squadroon line, the moon sailed out from behind a dark bank of cloud. About sixteen men, with the Skipper, Dane and Jimmie, also just common privates in the line, lay in little shallow rifle-pits that they had scraped with their bayonets. These pits were half full of slush. By each were two rifles with bayonets fixed and a pile of ammunition, and all around lay quantities of empty cartridge cases, showing how fierce the fight had been. Before the arrival

of Frank's last reinforcement there had only remained the three officers and five other ranks. It must, indeed, have been touch and go. A sentry challenged. At the sound of our voices the Skipper, long and haggard in the moonlight, rose stiffly out of his rifle-pit.

"Stout fellows," he said, "stout fellows! Wake the men up, Dano—by the time they have had their tea it will be time to stand-to."

I handed him a steaming mug with a stiff tot of rum in it. He laid his hand on my arm and pointed to the still, dark forms.

"Look, Padre, my Squadroon!" he said with a queer, twisted smile, and turned away to gulp his tea.

I walked along the line and looked for the last time on the white, cold face of each old friend. There lay our latest child from Sandhurst, the heir to great possessions, his curly head pillowed on his arm, his young life spilled so soon, so soon. There, terribly twisted, lay Corporal Gregson, our great half-back. Twice he had been hit and had refused to leave the line until the third bullet had stilled his stout heart for ever. There, face downwards, lay young Morgan, the cheery coster lad, who, for some act of boyish folly, was still under sentence of field punishment. I was inexpressibly pained to think that he should have left us in disgrace. There, on his back, with an arm across his chest, and with one knee drawn up as though asleep, lay Tiny, brave, affectionate, loyal little Tiny. Once we had been on leave together, and I thought now of an old, silver-haired lady, nearly blind —still hoping and praying. There, among others, lay seven sergeants and poor old Micky O'Grady, who

ought to have been away back miles behind with his waggon. There was not one of all those dead faces that did not stab my heart with happy memories of comradeship and grievous sense of loss. Ah, God, the pity and the madness of it all!

"I walked sorrowfully back to the Skipper.

"Hullo, where's my rum and tea?" came the indignant voice of Jimmie.

While it was actually being served out he had fallen down and slept from sheer exhaustion, unnoticed among the other still forms; and now, alas, the tea and rum were all of it gone!

"What's going to happen now?" I asked the Skipper.

"Arthur Jenner, our optimist here, says they'll come over in mass at dawn."

"Will they, do you think?"

"They'd be mad not to push again. We're all that's left between Berlin and the sea."

"And if they do, can you, can you stop them?"

"No," said the Skipper, "not a hope—if they really mean business. All my Hotchki are knocked out. They sent us a machine-gun, but it doesn't work; and our rifles are so choked up with mud and showers of falling earth from shell bursts, that it's all we can do to open and close the breaches at all, much less fire fifteen rounds a minute."

Dano growled savagely that he hoped to hell the blinkers would attack. If ever he had loved a man that man was his Troop Sergeant, with whom for the last two years he had fought and wrangled and blasphemed into a perfect understanding, and who now lay dead beside him with a bullet through his eye, and a dark, thick stain covering all his face.

Dano had heard the sickening smack of the fatal bullet; he had seen the bloody matter oozing; he had eased his old comrade's death agony; and he was burning to repay.

"How about that valley down there on the left, didn't they try to work up it?" I asked the Skipper.

"Oh, that's all right. The Fourth Brigade are on the other side, and I've got over a hundred of the Blankshires holding the valley itself."

"But will they—er, stay?"

"Rather; we caught them just in time coming away from the wood. When it was explained to their officers that they were going the wrong way and that we wanted to win this battle for a change, they turned to and fought like tigers. Hector is with them. I went down again just before dark and they were quite happy. They'll stay now till all's blue."

But he was wrong, for even then, down in the valley, Hector lay bleeding to death of a mortal wound —alone.

A sound of stealthy digging attracted our attention. We looked and saw Sam'l busily scraping the earth with a bayonet. Two rifles and a heap of dead men's bandoliers lay beside him.

"What are you doing there, Sam'l?" asked the Skipper.

No answer.

He repeated the question.

"I'm staying here, Skipper," he said, and went on digging.

As there was nothing else for it, I too picked up a rifle and looked around for a place to dig in.

"Have you been relieved off the Brigade?" asked the Skipper of Sam'l.

"No, but they can easily get another galloper."

"Have you been relieved off the dressing station?"

"No," I said, "but Purple——"

"Back you both go, then."

We did not answer. Sam'l went on steadily digging.

"If you were any good here, I'd let you stay," he said. "But if the Boche really pushes, a few men more or less makes no difference now. We've got to stay, but you've got other jobs. Off you go."

We dug on in silence.

The Skipper walked over and took Sam'l by the arm.

"Go," he said very quietly, pointing down the ridge.

And with heavy hearts we walked back down the dire hillside.

That was the last we saw of Sam'l for several months, as the next day he was wounded in the leg while carrying a message for the Brigadier.

Next morning the Boche did not come over in mass, as Arthur Jenner had predicted. Undoubtedly he meant to attack, but the best-laid plans of Boche and beast gang aft agley. All the night long British and French guns had been hurrying up to this decisive point of the war. The dawn indeed broke with a loud crash of artillery, but the shells came shrieking over our heads from the ridge behind us, the last ridge between us and Amiens; and, above the deep-voiced guns of Britain, we heard with joy the roaring rattle of the seventy-fives.

All the wood, all the German line was lashed with shard. Just in front of the Squadroon, between it and the wood, was a haystack with a German heavy machine-gun behind it. Soon a shell burst alongside,

scattering the gun crew and setting fire to the stack. One Boche fled rapidly to the wood and escaped. Two others ran limpingly after him and were both shot down; and three lay maimed, frantically writhing, while the flames of the burning hay lapped around and slowly licked them up.

Next, orders came for a piece of sublime bluff. The Squadroon, as having suffered most, was to remain in its position. The rest of the Brigade, a pitiful handful, were withdrawn, and proceeded, in conjunction with another Brigade on their left, to make an attack up the blind valley. This attack was, of course, not pushed home, but it achieved its purpose. All day the Squadroon lay cramped and cold in their little rifle-pits—for to expose themselves in daylight on that crest was instant death—being crumped at intervals and firing whenever they saw a Boche's head.

Every hour voices of fresh guns joined the roaring chorus from the ridge behind, and gradually an indefinable feeling of mastery crept over us all. We knew in our bones that the battle was to us; that the great German offensive had at last been brought to a standstill.

Late in the night large numbers of French took over our long, thin line. Worn out though they were, and although the noise and movement drew much fire, the Squadroon stayed on to bury their comrades. They made a rough wooden cross for each out of ammunition boxes, and took from each some small souvenir to send home to his relations. It is a melancholy example of how little the people at home could realize the conditions of war that, in answer to nearly every letter of condolence covering these souvenirs, we received abusive replies, wanting to

know, why we had not sent more, and hinting that we had misappropriated the dead man's belongings.

When this sad rite was finished, all that was left of the Squadroon, with every officer and man carrying two rifles and the remains of the Hotchkiss Guns, marched away back to the horses.

A few hours later we were on the road to Amiens. That strong exhilaration that always attends the escape from strain and peril was evident in us all. It seems most heartless now that we should have jubilated with so many friends left on the field behind us. But that reactionary emotion is one, I think, over which the heart and will have no control. Moreover, to us there was nothing terrible in Death. The dark, sad-visaged angel was our very near companion, and if she should come to take us by the hand, well, it would only be to lead us onward to our brothers who had gone before. Meanwhile the glad young life still pulsed in our veins. We knew, without the flood of laudatory messages from French and British commanders alike, that we had done our duty; we were worn out and starving, and soon we should have food and rest; and so for all these various reasons we were almost hysterically happy.

Next to me rode a young officer from another Squadron, a shy, modest boy, who, throughout the trials of those terrible ten days, had borne himself with consistent and conspicuous gallantry. Though, of course, he did not say so, I felt now that he was gay because he knew how pleased his wife would be with the decoration that he had surely won.

"Isn't this quiet topping?" he said happily. "After all that infernal racket! Not a shot, not a shell to be heard!"

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when we heard a shell falling. It was so sudden and unexpected in the prevailing hush that I ducked so sharply as to strike my helmet against the arch of my saddle. The shell burst close by, and when I looked up my young friend and his horse were lying dead on the road.

Unable to make Amiens that night, owing to the congestion on the road, we bivouacked in a wood. Here Eiffel rejoined, his haversack bulging with dainties and delicacies gathered in from heaven knows where, and which we straightway set about with a will, asking no idle questions as to their origin.

CHAPTER XII

APRIL

WE reached our old friend Amiens the following day, and passed there two halcyon nights. We were billeted, not in the once gay city itself, but in a distant suburb on the eastern outskirts. Nevertheless, after the hardships of the last ten days, we were wonderfully contented with our lot. Our mess and all our bedrooms were contained in the commodious house of a wine merchant, a house which, although furnished in the plush and gilded mirror style, and painful to the eye of the beholder, was luxuriously appointed and fitted with every modern convenience. Here we found our echelon awaiting us, so, in addition to the delight of hot baths and soft beds, we revelled also in the joy of pyjamas and clean raiment.

Although the bombardment proper of Amiens had not yet begun, the owner of our house with his wife and family had already fled, leaving house, household goods and cellars in charge of an elderly caretaker. On the day after our arrival, while shells were falling in a little square about a hundred yards away, a daughter of the family returned to look for some account book that had been left behind in the hurry and confusion of their exodus. We all felt very

uncomfortable at the agitation of this unhappy girl, who wept bitterly at the sound of bursting shells, at the sight of the home she had so recently left, now disordered by a horde of young barbarians; and most of all, at the profanation of the virginal sanctity of her bedroom by the rude occupation of Dano and Eiffel.

We were now no longer a squadron, a regiment, a brigade; we were just remnants—a few horses and not quite enough men to ride them.

Very fortunately for us, a famous Yeomanry Regiment, a Regiment which had covered itself with glory in the far-off days of Ypres, had lately been dismounted and was about to be transformed into a Machine Gun Battalion. This Regiment was now mounted on the nearest horses to hand and despatched bodily to us to fill up the great gaps in our ranks. It arrived on the second day of our sojourn in the suburb. The men were indeed the yeomen, the bowmen, the truemen of England, of the finest old agricultural stock; but the horses! Shade of Cromwell, quels chevaux!

Three-cornered, ragged bags of bones, unmouthed, unbalanced and unbent, they answered neither hand nor leg, bridle, aid nor spur. Men were very scarce in those days, but horses, it seemed, were scarcer still. And owing, perhaps, to the scarcity of men, it was impossible to train even the horses that there were. We knew well the training system of the reserve regiments. The horse is a gregarious animal. This salient point in his nature, his gregariousness, was fully taken advantage of by the so-called instructors to save an infinity of trouble and to cover a multitude of ignorances. Remounts, ridden by recruits who

had less idea of riding than the remounts had of being ridden, were herded about in droves until these droves could collectively be handled and directed by the instructors in the same way that a pack of fox-hounds is handled and directed by the whips. Then these "trained" horses were despatched overseas to war, where, unfortunately, gregariousness in the horse is so very often fatal to its rider. As most of us, from the Skipper downwards, had lost some or all of our chargers, and were expecting great things from this batch of remounts, our disappointment and disgust was of the deepest. A busy day was spent in organizing into Troops the new material with the remnants of the old, and in distributing the quadrupeds, alleged to be horses, to honest men totally undeserving of the punishment.

As the German advance had now undoubtedly been arrested, we were to be sent back to the vicinity of Abbeville, marching early the next morning, in order to undergo a thorough refitting and re-equipping from the base ordnance depot.

Now the caretaker of our house, zealous for his master's interests, had unlocked the great vault beneath the house and had sold vast quantities of wine to the men. The wine was dark and heavy, something of the nature of port, but more dull, without the glowing ruby, without the rapturous richness. It was, in fine, a base and treacherous wine. The men had been paid that day; they had had little to drink for many weeks; the entry of the stout yeoman had to be consummated according to prescriptive rites; and in their simplicity they treated this baleful beverage as ordinary *vin rouge*. Next morning, I write it with shame, the Squadroon was very late on parade.

After a two days' march we billeted in a small and comfortable village just outside Abbeville. Here five officers joined the Squadroon. Two had been with us before, had gone wounded to Blighty, and now returned joyfully to the fold. The other three were new. Every day of the few days that we were there, fresh horses, fresh men, fresh kit, and fresh equipment came up to us, and we were filled with bustle and activity, trying to make again a serviceable squadron out of so much raw material. All day remounts went to riding school, recruits to drill, young officers and new N.C.O.'s to tactical rides. We felt it in the air that we were training against time. Here, too, we had our first experience, among drafts of immature boys, of the conscript proper, the full-grown man who had not joined up until he had had to. His was a class which a regular Regiment naturally held in the deepest abhorrence and contempt. Nevertheless, many of our conscripts soon won the respect of their contemptuous comrades. The Skipper ordained that, as no one knew the circumstances behind each case, any casting up into their faces of their compulsion would be held as a grave crime; and that all the new-comers, yeomen, boys and conscripts alike, were to be received into the Squadroon with the old spirit of *camaraderie* which still survived so many of the men who had helped to create it, and which, he hoped, would soon again flame up in all its former united brightness. Many of our conscripts, we found, were steady, conscientious workers, usually married men with families, or sole supports of relatives. Later on, when we saw them staunch in action, it set us wondering if, perhaps, in the early days of the war, when all the world was wild with war hysteria, it had

not needed a stronger and sometimes a finer character not to join up in the face of all contumely than it did to take, blindly and heedlessly, the popular path of khaki. The steady, respectable father who did not join up was held by the populace in deepest scorn. The dissolute young ne'er-do-well, who, excited by brass bands and the taunts of young women, joined up in a mist of drunken sentimentalism, was instantly a national hero. And when we thought these things over we understood how wise were the words of those who said that no government should have the cruelty to leave a decision so momentous to the option of the individual.

After only a few days of this strenuous reconstruction, black news reached us. We had already lost one complete Army, and all the area that it had held. Now, we learned, the Hun had launched another tremendous offensive up north; the Portuguese had broken; the enemy had crossed the Lys, had penetrated deep into our line, and was driving hard for the sea.

Immediately we were on the road again, hastening by forced marches to the danger point. That, indeed, was a troublous time. Our old horses were worn out by the hardships of March; our remounts were weak, poor and untrained; our new drafts did not know how to pack their saddles, or how even to saddle up their horses; and some of our new officers were so young and delicate that, instead of being able to lead men, they needed constant mothering themselves. While struggling northwards in these adverse circumstances, we received Haig's historic, laconic, soldierly message to the British Army. It struck exactly the right note. Our backs were against the wall, it

said, and every one must stand and fight it out to the last.

As we progressed further and further northward, the roads were blocked and our march was impeded by floods of refugees. The plight of these unhappy people was all the more pitiable because, in many cases, it was the second time that they had found themselves in this most wretched situation. Many of them, in the first days of the war, had fled before the invading Huns, had returned, behind our armies, to their ravished homes, and now again were thrown out homeless on the roads. Doddering old men, women and children, paralytics and invalids, perched high atop of piles of bedding and furniture on country carts drawn by overladen horses; pushing perambulators, handcarts and wheelbarrows, all filled with infants and pathetic possessions; riding on little carts drawn by dogs; walking, shuffling, staggering along under the weight of their babies and their bundles, they flowed past us in a never-ending stream of misery. Of all nations the Briton has, on the surface, the roughest manner; and of all nations the Briton has, beneath this superficial roughness, the kindest heart. Where their own compatriots often looked on the distress of these poor creatures with an indifferent eye, the British soldier was always, when humanly possible, kind and helpful. When an overloaded cart stuck in the mud, khaki shoulders were soon straining at the wheel. When an old dame fell exhausted by the road, khaki arms raised her to her feet and supported her on her way. When a child fainted from hunger, khaki hands pressed nourishment to its lips. Old men's sorrows were momentarily lightened by the gift of ration baccy.

Khaki cars and lorries gave constant lifts. And as we looked on so much wretchedness, we wondered where was all the glamour and glory of war, of which throughout our lives, we had heard and read so much.

Presently we reached a position of readiness behind the Forest of Nieppe. Terrific and almost incessant gunfire was in progress. The enemy was making the most desperate endeavours to break through. But here the atmosphere was very different to what it had been in the south. Already the breach about Armentières was firmly closed. Against our unwavering line the furious assaults dashed themselves to pieces; and, out in front, field-grey corpses lay piled high upon each other. Covering all the landscape, behind every hedge and wood and copse, in every dip and hollow and sunken lane, sown as thick as seeds in spring, numerous as the sands of the sea, bristled our myriads of guns. When our leaders galloped from one headquarters to another, asking if our assistance was needed, and if so, where they would wish us to come into action, our services were invariably declined. One Australian Brigadier remarked, with more force than politeness:

"What the hell are you doing here? Do you think we're going to run away?"

Here, at any rate, the British Army was far from being beaten. But for the next few days the issue was still critical.

Doing those days we led a curious, nomadic life. By day we shyly hung about in woods, unseen by aircraft, and close behind the line, ready to render assistance if necessary. Our chief cares were to prevent our horses eating trees, making fires to keep

ourselves warm, and the boiling of our picnic tea. We saw no real fighting, and the few casualties that we had were caused by random shell-fire. At night we sometimes bivouacked in the wood or we sometimes withdrew a few miles to a village where the Squadroon was billeted in a hospitable farm. Horses stood out shivering in the open, and were rapidly assuming the elegant proportions of the skeleton. But the men slept snug and warm in hay-filled barns; and we all slept, neither snug nor warm, up in the dirty and verminous loft of the farm. Long before dawn we saddled up and marched off to the woods in order to reach their shelter from the hawk-eyed air scouts before the treacherous daylight. Not till after dusk, because of these same hawk-eyed air scouts, could we leave their cover again. Our existence was a continual and apparently aimless saddling and off-saddling in the dark, and, as William Henry phrased it, an everlasting to-ing and fro-ing.

Flick, our latest joined, went far to keep us young and entertained. A man at last, after a somewhat cloistered and precious childhood, he was filled with wonder and excitement at all the strangeness of his new surroundings, and was devoured by an eager curiosity concerning the cause of things. When the nights were cold, having only one blanket apiece, we used, for greater warmth, to sleep in pairs, rolled up in the two blankets. This partnership was called in soldier parlance "mucking in." Muck in! There was a manly, martial, swashing sound about the phrase that instantly took the fancy of Flick.

"Who'll muck in with me?" he cried eagerly on our first night in the loft.

Eiffel w-w-would. Before the night was very old,

Eiffel slept snugly in two blankets and poor Flick lay out uncovered on the bare, cold boards—shivering, but gaining experience.

Also Flick's tin hat and his head were unsuited to each other. The former had raised a large lump on the latter. This lump went on swelling to such an egg-like size that the tin hat rose higher and higher off his head until, when we trotted, it began to revolve, and soon spun around and round and round like a teetotum top.

"Gor blimey!" exclaimed an astonished onlooker. "Strike me if it ain't a blinking gyroscope!"

And when, after a few nights in our loft, the morning examination of his vest revealed the presence of the enemy, his pride and delight knew no bounds.

"I've got 'em, I've got 'em," he cried, as who should say, "Am I not now the compleat soldier?"

After some days of this Robin Hood-like life of the woods, what time but few trees remained unringed by our hungry horses, we received grave news from the neighbourhood of Ypres. The Hun was striking hammer blows at the re-entrant angles of the salient. Around about Mont Kemmel the situation was critical in the extreme. So violent and sustained was the enemy's attack that it was feared he might burst a way through by sheer weight of numbers and of metal. Once again we bestrode our poor skeletons and hammered along the hard high road, not with great speed, but, for some reason, at a snail's pace. During this march an evil chance befell the Squadroon. At the start our destination was unknown: we were to be directed to our billets or to our position in the line, as the case might be, when we arrived at a certain town about fourteen miles distant. While we were

passing through one town, the Squadroon, which was rear Squadron of the Regiment, was held up by the traffic-control sentry for nearly half an hour at a busy cross-road. While we waited, our brigade Machine Gun Squadron cut in by a side road between us and the Squadron of our Regiment ahead. This was a thing that very often happened on marches, so we followed along not at all put out by the intrusion.

After many miles, when the day was already ending, the Machine Gun Squadron ahead of us turned off the road into a field and began to put down their lines. Then we saw that there was no one else in front of them. In answer to our questions, the Machine Gunners told us that the rest of our Regiment had turned off at a village about five miles back, and that they had no idea whatever whither it was bound. We went files about and then halted for a few minutes. The Skipper stood on the road darkly looking at his map. He was a vain man and a kind man. It galled him deeply that so many men and horses should be put to so much inconvenience by a stupid carelessness on his part; and it galled him even more deeply to think that every officer and man was thinking that he had led them astray. Flick strolled up and broke in on his gloomy meditation.

"Have you lost yourself, sir?" he asked, not with any trace of bitterness or reproach, but in a tone of guileless and childlike inquiry. He simply wanted to know.

The Skipper's hand went down to his revolver; but Dano took Flick by the scruff of the neck and dealt with him behind the hedge. It was late on in the night by the time that we eventually found our billets.

The next week or so was with us a very curious phase. We found to our astonishment that most of the troops about us, even up there so close to Ypres, were French. Our Brigade lay billeted in the villages and farms around in rear of Mont de Cats, and sent down dismounted parties to help the French hold the support system of the line that faced the Boche at Mont Kemmel. The Squadroon, with their horses picketed along the four hedges of a field, occupied an abandoned cottage on the lower slopes of the steep hill that is crowned by the monastery of Mont de Cats itself. This was an association full of interest and sentiment for us, as it had been the Squadroon who retook those sacred piles and that commanding position, after a sharp engagement, from the retiring enemy in 1914.

For two nights we remained in the comparative peace and comfort of our cottage. Here our chief business was to prevent marauding bands of French soldiers, and sometimes solitary freebooters, from looting the humble goods and chattels of the deserted home. Our Allies are indeed persistent and relentless depredators—and cannibalistic withal. We all slept in one small room; most of us on the stone floor. During the first night Flick awoke with a feeling of uneasiness. He thought he had heard a shell go over. He sat up and cocked his ears. He waited, five minutes, ten, fifteen; by Jove, yes, here came another! and a long "heavy" whistled evilly as it sped over the cottage and on, probably searching for an important railway bridge about three-quarters of a mile behind. Flick sat up listening intently. Sure enough, after another fifteen minutes there came another shell. He leaned over and woke up Dano.

"I say, old boy, there's a hell of a barrage going on!" he said.

In a few seconds there was!

On the third afternoon came the Squadroon's turn to go down into the support line. We marched over a shoulder of the high Mont de Cats hill, and down the steep declivity that fell sharply into a broad valley below. The passage of that road, which was under direct observation from the enemy's positions, was always fraught with danger and excitement. He fired several "crashes" of battery fire on to portions of it while we were on the march, and several times we had to take shelter under steep banks while the whizz-bangs burst and the fragments flew around. On our way lay a small collection of houses on either side of the road, which was dignified by the name of a village. Some "crashes" had been fired on it a few minutes earlier, and, as we began to pass through it, shells again fell thick and fast. About the road lay a few lately killed and wounded French soldiers. The air was heavy with crashes and groans and dust and smoke and shard and flying fragments of masonry. In all this horrid tumult two small children walked hand in hand straight up the middle of the road toward us. One was a small boy of about six, the other a little girl of about four. Their eyes appeared dazed, and they walked as though in their sleep. The Skipper swore gruffly, the men swore, we all swore. We put them in the ditch and left them; that was all we could do, as we had to shove on. I have often wondered since how those little mites came to be there alone and if they are still alive.

We reached, with only a few casualties, our destination on the lower slopes of the great hill. In a

grove by the roadside was a luxurious encampment of army huts, formerly a divisional headquarters. Just beyond the grove lay the sector of support trench to which we had been assigned in case of emergency, and, until that emergency arose, we were allowed to live in the huts. It sounds most dangerous that we should have occupied a large encampment under the direct observation of the enemy; but there were so many such encampments all around and so many farms, houses and villages, all teeming with troops, that the Hun gunners could not attend to them all. Moreover, alongside each hut, little deep, narrow trenches and funk-holes had been dug, in which we could take instant cover whenever we were shelled. A large formation of dismounted French cavalry, in conjunction with whom we were holding the support line, were already lodged in the encampment. By a curious coincidence the Capitaine in command was an old friend, who, in the year before the war, had been attached to the Regiment over in Ireland for autumn manœuvres. He was a fine horseman, a skilful soldier and a most charming gentleman. We combined messes with happy and interesting results, for although none of us could talk any but the pidginest of French, all the French officers could talk fluent English; and the interchange of international banalities and international ideas was no doubt broadening to the mind and instructive to the intelligence of both races.

While we were in that support line the great battle of Mont Kemmel was in progress. Our encampment, some distance behind the front line, was all among the field batteries. All day and all night, without ceasing, the guns growled and roared and bellowed

and barked and belched and coughed and spat around us acccording to their various natures. A Nissen hut is a veritable sound box. It echoes, re-echoes, magnifies and reverberates every sound; and soon our heads ached and rang and split with the pandemonium of ceaseless and deafening noise. At intervals a crash of shells was fired on our grove, but with marvellously little damage. We saw, however, a vivid demonstration of the accuracy of modern gunfire. A French battery came into action a few hundred yards away from our grove, alongside a line of trench. Four of its guns were in the open, the other two concealed in a hedge. The battery fired away merrily for a time; and then there came retribution. A crump fell alongside one of the guns, wounding several gunners. Then another fell, a direct hit, on another gun. The teams all took refuge in the trench. In about ten minutes, calmly and deliberately, with not more than ten shells, all the four guns in the open were knocked out by direct hits. The two guns under cover of the hedge were not touched. I looked on at this grim, horrible spectacle with a bleeding of the heart and with wonder why those four unfortunate guns had been put out in the open.

The strain of the past weeks had played havoc with the Skipper's feeble frame: his nerves were worn to shreds, his hands trembled, his feet dragged, his voice was very weak; he was about at the end of his tether. On our last night in these quarters the battle was particularly violent; and he passed the whole of it in pacing around the sentry line. I, too, unable to sleep amid the infernal din of the artillery, got up and joined him at about four in the morning. In front of us Metteren—or was it Baileul? I forget—

was burning. The sound of incessant machine-gun fire came from its direction. The Skipper pointed to the blazing town.

"Look," he said, "thousands of Boches swarming over the walls! Can't you see them?"

I looked. A vast sheet of flame, made up of tiny, darting, licking tongues of fire, enveloped all the town and leaped and danced above the darkened ruins. Intertwining with the quivering mass of flame were curling, twisting wreaths of smoke, now light, now dark, ever changing in density and colour. The aspect of the whole to tired eyes gave the illusion of endless and multitudinous movement. I looked for a few moments and was not at all sure that I did not see innumerable figures, field-grey figures, swarming over the walls. One could have seen anything in those writhing flames.

"It's less than two miles off," he said; "they'll be here in no time. We must sound the 'stand-to' at once and man our trench. I'll—I'll just get Purple to have a look first, though."

Purple was with difficulty roused out of a sound slumber. He came out of his bunk, out of the hut, and took one look at the ghostly host of salamanders.

"Go and lie down, Skipper, and get some sleep!" he said, and instantly proceeded to follow his own excellent advice.

Early in the morning we were withdrawn to our horses, and, after a few more days of waiting about on roads and fields, in case we should be needed for the battle, we were despatched by slow degrees to the vicinity of Étaples and the joys of safety and the sea.

CHAPTER XIII

RECONSTRUCTION

SLEEP, Sleep, how wonderful are the powers of thy healing art! Refreshed in mind and body, it was a light-hearted company that rode, some few days later, on a wet, wild evening of early May into the humble little village of Énoch, which was destined to be our home for the next few months. The horses stood in the open, the billets of the men were abominable, the inhabitants were more surly, ungracious and grasping than any we had met before, and at first sight no single prospect pleased us, and all the folk were vile. Nevertheless, we were so rejoiced at the idea of leading a human life again—for some weeks at least, we hoped—so delighted at the prospect of the pleasures of civilization, of baths and beds and pyjamas, and nights of quietness, unbroken by the hideous sounds of battle, that we gaily made the best of all the many disadvantages of our habitation, resolving to make good the glaring inconveniences and deficiencies as soon as possible by our own labours and ingenuity.

Indeed, it was not surprising that our billets were not of the best, and that we were painfully cramped for space, because, not only had the British area been

very greatly reduced by the huge losses in ground of the Fifth Army, and by the lesser losses up north, but also into this already restricted area masses of American troops were now pouring from across the Atlantic at an astonishing rate of speed.

We had been brought back here to carry on with the work which, for a few days only, we had been doing before the northern offensive began; the work of reconstruction, of transforming our raw and heterogeneous material into skilful and efficient Cavalry. It was a very happy period for us all, that peaceful springtime among the blossoming trees and the flowering meads, glorying in bright warm days on the shores of the lazy, purring sea. Only those who have long walked hand in hand with Death, and soon must walk hand in hand with her again, can ever know the full sweetness of Life.

Our first care was the horses. After weeks of continual standing saddled up, hardship, short commons and exposure, their condition was too pitiable for any words. For the first month we employed every human art, wile, trick and villainy of horsemastership and economy in bringing back the flesh to their wasted frames. During this process the inhabitants liked us less than ever. When the horses were fit to work again we had training of remounts, tactical rides, schooling, and long days of drill and manœuvre on the sands, followed by picnic dinners in the woods, and bathing of men and horses in the tepid sea.

Particularly we were all filled with zeal for schooling horses at that time, partly because we had all learnt since March, from our own bitter experiences, what misery it is to ride an untrained horse, and

partly because some of us had lately returned from the very interesting and practical equitation school at Cayeux. The Skipper, whose dear hobby before the war was polo, had always been an enthusiastic trainer; and now Dano and Jimmie came back from the school equally enthusiastic. The wave of enthusiasm spread over the whole Squadroon. We hired a small field, made open-air manages, put up schooling jumps and spent many happy afternoons in the noble art of long reining and of *haute école*. A vile practice, too, arose among us—an echo of Cayeux—that, as we each came in to breakfast, we seized the heaviest thing to hand and smote it across the nearest shoulders, shouting vociferously "Leg, leg, leg!"

All this time a silent and unseen process was at work. Slowly and surely the old, glad spirit, the strong esprit de corps of bygone days, budded and bloomed in the new elements of the old Squadroon until we were all once again bound together by chains more durable than of iron. The yeomen, inclined at first to be a little reserved, soon did us the high courtesy of doffing the historic badge that they had worn with so much pride and so much honour, and of donning in its place our own beloved badge. The immature boys, under the influence of hard, but not too hard, work, plenty of recreation and good and copious rations, soon took on the form and style of men. Conscripts, and men called up under the raising of the military age, found amongst us volunteers far older than themselves. And all, I think, after their endless vagaries and transitions through depots, training centres, reserve regiments and base camps, where nobody was anybody's child, were glad to find that they had reached a real home at last.

The Adjutant having returned, healed of his wounds, Tubs, the versatile and invaluable, took up again the leadership of our First Army. Old Bill came back to us from Blighty with nothing worse than a slight stiffness in his gait. Later on, too, Sam'l returned; but his wound had been followed by a serious and chronic complication, for, during his convalescence, he had become married. In France the daily prayer of every fighting soldier was to stop a "Blighty one." But when anyone had had that great good luck, and when he had been back home for a few weeks, he almost invariably started moving heaven and earth to get sent out again. The past and the future—that is the mirage on the deserts of the human mind—never satisfied with the present, except between spells of peril. But something tells me that this is a well-worn platitude. Anyway, the return of Bill and Sam'l was doubly welcome, since it not only restored to us the pleasure of their company, but it also put an end to the ceaseless correspondence on the subject of their weekly applications to return.

For the officers there was a wealth of entertainment in the neighbourhood. We could, if we wished, play tennis at Paris Plage, play golf at Le Touquet, go sailing from Étaples, or go picnicking in the woods with dainty war-workerettes; and all these things we sometimes did. But our most frequent amusements were cricket in the afternoons and rounders in the evening. The Skipper and Tubs had sometimes to go away and play in brigade and divisional matches, but for the most part all our efforts and all our interests were centred in the Squadroon. A section of G.H.Q. at Montreuil kindly lent us their delightful cricket ground, an oasis in the woods of St. Josse. There we

played great matches against other Squadrons of the Regiment, Squadrons of other Regiments, our Battery and our Machine Gun Squadron. And what I think we enjoyed still more, we frequently played matches of our own, Army against Army, or one half-squadron against the other half. On these occasions pack ponies accompanied us to the ground, laden with the ingredients of tea, with an abundance of buns from the bakery at Étaples, and sometimes with quantities of strawberries from the neighbouring farms; and as the men, after an exciting match, did full justice to this royal spread, reclining on the fresh green grass, or under the cool shade of sweetly scented pines, they perhaps forgot for a while their thin horses, their saddles that wouldn't polish, the girls they'd left behind them, the eternal round of sentry-go, the horrors they soon must see again.

Those inter-troop matches were matches indeed, requiring quite a different kind of genius to that of conventional cricket. Corkran, the dandy ever, appeared always in white flannels raised from goodness only knows where, and piled up big scores by exquisite leg glides and shots cleverly placed between the fielders. But the innings were usually short. Nearly every member of each side took his turn of bowling—or throwing as the case might be, and often was—and the variety in velocity and iniquity of this rapid succession of performers soon demoralized the most expert batsman. Our yeoman corporal, who had played regularly for a first-class county, never, I think, made double figures in a troop match. Tubs, who for two years had worn his Harrow cap, was frequently dismissed for duck by some wild bowler in breeches, putties and spurs and grey-back shirt, with braces

slipped over shoulders and dangling down behind. And the Skipper, who had captured many wickets at Lord's and on other historic fields, was often swiped out of the ground by Arthur Jenner, by Harold, his own servant, and by other hearty players unpadded, or wearing one pad only—as like as not on the wrong leg—who, like true artists, hit out freely according to the light of nature, wholly unhampered by such artificial traditions as gloves, guard and the straight bat.

Then we caught our horses, which had been grazing around the outskirts of the ground, threw a blanket over their backs and rode home, filled with the pleasant tiredness that comes of strife without anger and long hours cleanly spent in the peace and sweetness of God's good air. Then, always ready, nay eager, for a meal, we sat down to dinner in our large and comfortable mess-room with all the windows open wide, letting in the freshness of the summer evening. It was the one and only spacious room in the village, with a huge table that not only took us all with ease, but many a guest as well. And, while we ate our food and talked away and won the war, the great gramophone played to us all the latest songs from home. "Roses of Picardy" and "The Bells of St. Mary's" were at that time the favourites, though "Hullo, my Dearie," was by no means as yet dead. Once we cleared the room and Flick began to teach us the jazz, but Madame immediately came in and stopped such indecent frivolity.

Towards the end of dinner, just about the time when an immense bowl of strawberries and cream would make its appearance, the refugees from Étaples would begin to pass through. That unfortunate town was so frequently and so heavily bombed that in the

evenings almost all its inhabitants used to go out and sleep in the woods around or in the neighbouring villages. Every night towards the end of dinner a sort of phaeton carriage passed by *en route* to the next village, the lucky village of Brexent, containing two elderly ladies and a girl of wonderfully sweet and simple beauty. As they passed we always jumped up from the table, ran to the window and waved greetings. The two old ladies and the fascinating young one smiled and gaily waved back; to the great indignation of the latter's husband, who rode alongside the carriage on a bicycle and scowled horridly at us over his shoulder. One night he was so busy scowling, and scowled so hard and so long, that, not being able to scowl at us and look where he was going at the same time, he ran into a wheel of the carriage and buckled the wheel of his bicycle; and we, as immorally responsible for the accident, had to buy him a new one.

After dinner the hour before darkness was devoted to rounders. In this excellent game, as well as at cricket, there was keen rivalry between the Armies. When a good ball was hit, and it was touch and go whether a rounder would be scored, the shouts of excitement could be heard for miles. But the greatest joy of all, to friend and foe alike, was when a fielder threw at and hit a runner between the posts; and the harder he hit him, especially if on the head or face, the greater the joy of the onlookers.

And now I come to a very delicate subject. It is with great diffidence that I speak of it at all, for, in doing so, I am disclosing one of the great secrets of the war, a dark secret that reflects no credit on the Squadroon. After March and April, when we reached

Énoch, our horses were as near to skeletons as any living thing can be. Some weeks later, when inspected and marked by the G.O.C., they were the best conditioned in the whole Division. How did this arrive? As I write it now, after all these months, I still feel the hot blush of shame mounting to my forehead. The railway ran through Énoch. Along the railway, at a slow pace, ran ration trains of trucks piled high with bales of hay and sacks of corn. For some days, with bulging eyes and watering mouths, we watched these treasures rolling past, and we brooded, deep and long. So near and yet so far! And then—but I may not say more, or I should be guilty of illegally divulging a patent, the joint patent of Dano, Flick and Jimmie.

Yes, those were happy days, the past forgotten, the future resolutely unthought of; although we did sometimes look wistfully across the blue waters and wonder how long, how long—if ever!

While we were in these billets a man was accidentally killed; and it was a strange thing that this one death in an atmosphere of perfect peace, followed by the barbaric pomp of a military funeral, created a far deeper gloom than was ever created by many hundreds of deaths in action.

About this time two great events happened. First, the Germans had made their last desperate offensive on the French, had been counter-offended, and were now showing the first signs of their impending dissolution. Secondly, after long months of closure, "leef" had been reopened.

The Skipper, who was the first of us to "proceed on permission," had just returned, and, as none of us had been home for nearly a year, we were eagerly question-

ing him about the state of Blighty. Needless to say, he was delighted at such an opportunity of holding forth.

"It's really rather touching," he said, "after all these years people still wave out of their windows to the old leave train—all the way up from Folkestone to Victoria."

"What's the Little Village like these days?" asked Tubs.

"Oh, same as usual. All the feminines who were wealthy before the war are toiling like honest working women; and all the feminines who were honest working women before the war are flaunting it like fine ladies."

"But what did you do yourself?"

"Oh, I racketed about to dances and theatres and things. Curious thing the theatre crowd at Piccadilly Circus. Just arriving there I couldn't get it out of my head that they hadn't all just arrived too. I sort of felt it was a special occasion, something to do with me. It's funny to think that all that huge, seething crowd is there every night, is there at this minute—was there those nights when we were on the ridge in front of Amiens—barging and bustling from tube to theatre and theatre to tube. Yes, rather, I was hecticly gay, but I suppose I'm getting old, for it all bored me quite a good deal. One day I went out to Kew on top of a bus. I enjoyed that best."

"Ay, you can often get more fun for twopence than what you can for ten bob," said Bill.

"By-the-by, I learned one thing. If there's ever another war, and you're ambitious and want to get on, don't go *near* the war zone; don't go a yard beyond Whitehall and Piccadilly. There's a lot of old dug-outs in my club who saunter between it and

their offices. Last time I was on leave they were all captains. Now they are all colonels. And there's only one major in a fighting regiment! One I noticed particularly; not only has he gone up to colonel, but last time I saw him he had only one ribbon, a coronation ribbon, and now he's camouflaged behind two rows of loud ribbons of countries he can't ever have even seen. Stick to the Homeland, chaps, if you want high honour and foreign decorations. Don't believe that gag about no man being a prophet in his own country —it ain't so!"

This set Dano off on his favourite growl.

"The blinking Staff," he said, "they get everything! Safety, comfort, high rank, big pay! Why the blinking blink should they get all the decorations as well? They do nothing but plot and scheme to do each other down! They just batten on our blood and bones; they're the—the—war profiteers of the Army! And when you and I come back off leave we have to get up at five in the morning—with a thick head—to catch the blinking train, while some little squirt of an A.D.C. with red tabs, who spends all his life in a château, or some blinking clerk from Rouen, comes back like a lord after lunch by the staff train, and, what's more, has a car to meet him at Boulog. It's too——"

"It's all very well to damn the Staff," said the Skipper, "but you must remember that it takes a fellow an awful lot of expense and the blinking awful sweat of at least two years' hard cramming before he can get into the Staff College—and there he has two years of worse sweat than ever before he passes out. Only thoroughly suitable fellows are allowed to enter at all; and, whenever you have any dealings with

them, they always know all your difficulties before you even tell them, and are invariably considerate and helpful."

"Yes, quite so," said Purple; "but how many Staff College fellows are there on the Staff now? One in a hundred, perhaps!"

"What I want to know is why they get all the decorations as well as all the other advantages," repeated Dano fiercely.

"Well," said the Skipper, "in the first place it's presumed a man is an exceptionally good man or he wouldn't be on the Staff at all. Secondly, put yourself in a General's place. He lives with a lot of his Staff *en famille* as it were. They are always ready night and day to do his lightest bidding. Not only do they serve him well and faithfully in all military matters, but they see he gets the things he likes to eat—and perhaps more to the point, to drink—his favourite cigarettes, cigars. They ride with him, shoot with him, fish with him, play bridge with him; they are always with him, like the most dutiful of sons. If he is human and affectionate and grateful, and likes to see happy faces around him, it's going to be very hard to pass over his own Staff when rewards are going."

"They can keep all their decorations! Give me two eyes, two arms and two legs, and I don't want any more," said Bill.

"That sounds all right, Bill," said I, "but as a matter of fact there's no man living who isn't pleased to get a decoration. If he wasn't, his mother or his wife or his sweetheart would be. Out here, where we all know each other's strength and weakness, and where we know that pretty well all men are brave, and where we know also all the jobbery that goes

on, perhaps ribbons don't count for much. But a youngster on leave takes his best girl to dine at the Carlton. At the next table there are four other youngsters all with the M.C. His breast is bare. His girl jolly soon notices and begins to think things; and he feels pretty quickly what she is thinking. No, it would have been much better either to have had a Croix de Guerre, like to French, or no decorations at all. They are so palpably unfair."

"Especially immediate awards," said Purple. "There's no standard about them at all. Take a Brigade. The Colonels of two Regiments don't believe in rewarding fellows for doing only their duty, and send in no names except for deeds of superhuman gallantry—which, by the way, are sometimes done by utter wasters and men who are drunk. The third C.O. goes on the system of rewarding fellows who have consistently done their job well for a long time. When his Regiment has been in action he deliberately makes up a fictitious story about them and sends it in. So, in the one Brigade, of the three Regiments, all of which have seen exactly the same fighting, you will often see two Regiments with practically no decorations at all, and the third simply smothered in them. Again, suppose two C.O.'s go on the system of rewarding long-deserving merit by these fictitious stories, the Colonel with the livelier imagination and the readier pen will get more rewards for his lads than the other less talented one. I've often been amused at medal presentation parades to see the look of blank astonishment come over fellows' faces when they've heard for the first time their own special acts of gallantry! And those long lists of gallant deeds in the *Times* make me rock with laughter."

"They soon get to believe them," said the Skipper.

"But surely the case of the fellow who does his job well for a long time is the one that ought to be rewarded," said Dano.

"I quite agree," said the Skipper, "if you are going to have these rotten rewards at all; but not by a system that has its very foundation in falsehood. Instead of all this endless correspondence, and all this mean and sordid business of racking our brains to invent lies, they might, after a good action, hand so many medals to each C.O. and leave it to him to distribute them in his own Regiment."

"They can keep their blinking medals so long as they leave me my limbs," repeated old Bill.

He, over ten years a yeoman, wore the Mons, the real Mons, ribbon; a rare distinction among any but the regular Army. And so, with no great knowledge of our subjects, we often talked and argued and wrangled and moralized and laid down the law.

I have mentioned, I think, that marriage befell Sam'l in the days of his convalescence. Anyway, it did. As the weeks went on and his leave was still a thing of the dim and distant future, Sam'l yearned. Then a great and Columbus-like plot was hatched. The following Monday was a holiday. A romantic week-end was projected. The owner of a fishing smack at Étaples was bought body and soul; the Sam'l-ette was warned to be at a certain town on the south-eastern coast of England. Sam'l, given favouring winds, was to embark early on Saturday morning on his Leander-like enterprise—how Leander-like, he had no idea at the start. No opposition was anticipated from the Skipper, who was held mainly responsible for the calamity of Sam'l, as he had frequently

and publicly maintained that every man should be married by the age of twenty-five. Indeed he expatiated so often and so earnestly on the beauty and the pricelessness of a good woman's love, that we all wondered how it was that he was not married himself. Moreover, at this time, he was particularly keen about national reconstruction. As we had expected, he readily gave his consent. The day broke dark and lowering, but Sam'l, against the urgent protests of the owner, insisted on putting out to sea. Soon the winds roared; the waters rose; the waves beat about that little barque. Loud raged the tempest for several days. On the white cliffs of Albion the Sam'l-ette stood watching and waiting, anxious and forlorn, like the father of Lord Somebody's daughter in the poem. Having eventually landed on the northern coast of Spain, Sam'l, silent and sheepish, returned to us more than a week later.

At this time, night after night, whenever the weather was fine, the bombing planes passed over us on their dire visits to Étaples; and night after night we sat up watching from our windows the fiery tumult in the skies. First we heard the checking drone of the Boche engines; then the furious barking of the "archies"; then we saw the forest of ghostly arms, waving and groping up into the heavens, like the tentacles of some great blind octopus; then the constellation of sparks and flashes, as the rapid barrage burst; then, from the earth, the dull red leaping flashes and the sullen, echoing roar of the exploding bombs. Then fragments, of falling shell, humming and whirring and hissing and whizzing, fell about us, sometimes crashing through roofs, sometimes injuring a man or horse. Sometimes the groping tentacles fastened on to a

plane. More arms and more darted across the heavens and closed upon the victim. And the spectacle of that tiny noxious insect, that little dragon-fly, all shining silver in the ghostly beams, was so weirdly beautiful as to take the breath away. Sometimes, too, we saw up there a sudden conflagration, and a flaming mass came falling through the void. A faint sound of cheering from Étaples would reach us as we looked on with mingled horror and delight and pity.

These visitations became so grievous that more and more searchlights were posted on all the country around, and, among them, one on a rise just above our village. Next time the raiders passed over, this searchlight opened, and the raiders promptly dropped nine bombs upon us. Two fell into cottages, the remainder along a street. There was the whizzing sound of the falling bombs; an instant after, mighty, dull red flashes, showers of sparks, deafening crashes; and a few seconds later, a hail of brickbats and debris, which shattered nearly every roof in the village. Every atom of glass and china, was, of course, smashed to atoms by the concussion. The huge candelabra in our mess-room fell in terrible ruin on the table. Not a window pane remained. Outside the scene was heart-rending. The villagers, all old men, women and children, were panic-stricken. Shrieking, groaning, moaning, uttering sounds of inhuman terror, they leaped out of their beds and rushed blindly, madly out into the country. Only a few of our horses were killed, only a few men slightly wounded, but I noticed that men who had never flinched in battle were not altogether unshaken by this Terror of the Night.

Those weeks of recuperation had worked wonders on our raw material, human and equine. Horses were big and hard; less gregarious and more flexible. Men were likewise big and hard; could pack a saddle, saddle a horse; could shoot a little, could ride a little. Young N.C.O.'s could handle Sections with some degree of skill; and already Flick began to show promise of becoming a Great Leader.

To enliven the monotony of training, and at the same time to give it an added zest, we decided to have sports. Not exactly sports, nothing quite so commonplace, but something grander, wider, nobler, more in the spirit of Olympic games. Tubs, of course, and William Henry, undertook the stage management. Our friends of G.H.Q. again lent us an ideal ground. Tracks were laid down, tapes were put up, a fiendishly ingenious obstacle course was constructed, and greasy poles were placed across a deep stream for mop fighting. There were gallows with suspended buckets of flour and pitch for tilting; a regulation Olympia jumping course; a smaller course for remounts; a smaller one still for pack ponies. Posts were put up for bending races and mounted musical chairs. A programme of events, calling forth every form of military skill, had been drawn up with such ingenuity that scarcely a man in the Squadroon could fail to win a prize of some sort. Every comfort and convenience had been provided; a band had been inveigled from Étaples; chairs had been begged, borrowed and stolen; marquees and lesser tents rose up in snowy splendour and coolness; and a great tea tent and bar —the latter under the capable, sympathetic and broad-minded direction of Dano—were to be strong centres of attraction. Also, two clowns of unrivalled

mpudence and vulgarity had been secured at enormous trouble. All our friends had been invited, including our Generals, not as Generals but as friends.

One thing only, one most important thing, was still wanting. In the second of Plutarch's Lives you may read of a great genius, I forget his name, who, knowing his world, quickly reformed the decadent Athenian cavalry. He built riding schools in the most fashionable parks and resorts, got all the prettiest girls of the town to come and look on at the drills, and soon there was no finer cavalry in the world. This strong, sweet feminine influence we lacked; but we made haste to repair the deficiency. The best-looking amongst us, about the choice of whom, incidentally, there was considerable dissatisfaction, were sent the round of the hospitals and the canteens, armed with invitations to the pretty workers, who graciously accepted, and who, by their gentle presence, would stimulate us to incredible prodigies of knightly emulation—and who afterwards would write home how frivolous and idle the Cavalry were.

The Mother Superior, or whatever she is called, of the G.H.Q. Waacery, propitiated by the homely face and the trustworthy manner of the Skipper, consented to come herself and to allow a hundred or so of her girls to come as well. Races for them, affinity races and three-legged races with our braves, were included in the programme. After the prizes had been presented, and the usual cheers had been given for the usual people, Tubs, with his customary thoroughness, had arranged that the moon should rise, that the band should play dreamy dance music, and that the Waacs and our braves should dance on the green sward till the witching hour of midnight.

All these plans had been made; all difficulties, with great tact and labour, had been overcome; all the paraphernalia had been collected and erected; all the men were overflowing with anticipation and excitement, and everything was smiling and serene. After dinner on the eve of the great day, we all stood around the piano in high spirits. Tubs hammered out the accompaniments, Sam'l sang our popular songs in a fine baritone, and Dano roared out his particular piece of resistance, while we all opened our pipes and let ourselves go in the chorus:

"Come, landlord, have you any good wine,
Fit for the cavalry of the line?
Stiboo, you beggars, stiboo, you beggars, stiboo!"

In the middle of our concert Eddie and Dunn, the Adjutant, wandered in, casual-like, and joined in our songs with a careless gaiety. Just as they were going away, Dunn whispered to the Skipper:

"Pack up everything, old boy, we're off to-morrow night. Rotten luck about your sports! Yes, another gap; we don't know where, but it looks like Amiens."

CHAPTER XIV

THE GREAT ADVANCE

ONCE again, as at Cambrai, the nights were filled with stealthy marching, the roads crawled with a monster movement, the darkness breathed muffled sinister sounds, like unto some huge prehistoric beast, straddling over a vast area, and dragging its scaly bulk onwards, seeking after its prey. Each night at nine o'clock the Squadroon filed out on to the appointed rendezvous. Soon there was a quick flash of a torch, the voice of the Adjutant asking if we were all up; then, a few minutes later, the low-voiced order "Get mounted" rippled down the ranks, we climbed into our saddles and the long column was on its way again.

Those marches were by no means pleasant. The first three nights it poured with rain; also the darkness was so dense that we had to keep close up to the Squadron ahead lest we should lose our way at every turn. On these marches too, unlike those of the Cambrai gap, we did a lot of trotting. Now trotting, in half-sections, in the inky dark, with no distance between Squadrons, is as painful a performance as anyone can well go through. There is continual backing and filling, barging and bumping, concertinaing,

rushing forward to make up, galloping and checking, banging and crashing, bitterness and blasphemy, envy, hatred and malice and all uncharitableness. Moreover, the pouring rain, the sloshing mud, the prohibition to smoke and the presence of batteries and other troops marching alongside us on the self-same road, all tended to increase the pain the strain and the weariness of our pilgrimage through those long nights of doubt and sorrow.

Shortly before dawn we would reach the village that was to be our that day's moving tent. Horses were watered at river or stream or well or pump as most convenient was; sleepy billeting parties with flash of torch and lantern conducted men and horses to their respective resting-places. Then, when all were settled in, we sought our mess in some or other humble little cottage where Madame had perhaps already prepared coffee for us, and where perhaps, too, a bottle of wine or beer or cider, or wine and beer and cider, stood temptingly on the table. And, if Madame was kind and Purple had been tactful, there might even be bread and an omelette as well. Day would be breaking as we sat down to this light repast, followed by the longed-for pipes we might not smoke upon those secret marches. Then, in the available bed or beds and on the floor, we lay down to sleep, in our clothes, of course, since we had no other wardrobe beyond what we carried on our backs and in our haversacks.

At eleven o'clock we breakfasted and lunched in one, or, to use the vulgar parlance of the camp, we brunched, and thereafter the remainder of the day was spent in grooming, watering and feeding the horses, the usual inspections, snatches of sleep and food. No movement of men and horses in the open

was allowed, lest the enemy's ubiquitous air scouts should discover the enterprise that was afoot. The Skipper, at the cost of much precious space in his haversack, always carried a book on these occasions, and if he had not been able to finish it by the eve of zero day he looked on ahead to see what the ending was, for, he said, it would be rotten luck to be outed in the middle of a real good story without ever knowing how it had ended. I suspect myself that he found a thrilling novel was as a strong narcotic to his lively imagination in those days of suspense before the battle.

In some subtle, indefinable way, the atmosphere of this movement was entirely different to that of Cambrai. In the Cambrai gap we marched in bitter winter weather for mile upon mile, through devastated areas and through old battlefields, with the ominous sights and sounds of the line always before us and gradually drawing closer. To me it had held an essence of peculiar horror, horror made doubly horrible by a strong presage of evil and disaster. This time it was different. It is true that we were drenched to the skin, and that we were badly bruised and chipped and scarred from the nightly battle and the rattle of the trotting on the hard high road. It is true that the marches were more and longer, and that towards the end we were very tired indeed. But three things, I think, went to make up that palpable difference. The weather, though wet, was warm—an immense factor in war where cold is the bitterest of agonies and the deadliest of foes. We marched, not through the hideous ruin of a once fair land, but through a land still fair and smiling, peopled by a prosperous peasantry and little touched by the blasting hand

of war. And, greatest of all, I know now what we did not know then, but what our subliminal consciences did know then, that we were marching to victory. The vast, indomitable spirit of Foch that flowed as hugely as the sea, had infected, infused, inspired, unknown to our puny selves, *our* puny spirits with his own irresistible will to conquer: and the enemy was already overthrown.

At about seven o'clock in the evening we roused ourselves from slumber, or returned from our troops, or from visiting other Squadrons, or from whatever we might have been doing, and sat down to our dinner of pork and beans and tinned fruits. Afterwards a final pipe and then we got ready for the march again.

Much of the smoothing of our path on these occasions was effected by the Skipper's gigantic Harold. This stalwart yeoman's heart was as large as his body, his good nature was inexhaustible and he smiled a broad smile of invincible amiability. He invariably accompanied Purple with the billeting party, and as soon as he entered our prospective mess he radiated an air of so much manly strength and kindliness that the very surliest of surly old madames would soon be softened and our welcome would be assured. From continual practice and by the aid of a little manual of conversation, he had learnt to speak passing fluent French; and, before we had been many hours in any house, we would hear the entire establishment, old and young, family and domestics, singing in unison under his direction:—

"Bonsoir ole zhin,
Sharioh shin shin,
Nâpooh too-ta-loo,
Good-bye-ee!"

On the second evening of our march we watched him through the window of our mess busily cleaning out, under the pump, a caldron used for boiling pig-swill; and we idly speculated what on earth he was up to. Presently he came in and addressed the Skipper:

"Shall we bath now, sir?" he asked with his usual broad smile.

The Skipper blenched.

"Er—no, I don't think so, not this evening, Harold, not this evening."

"Oh, come, come, sir!" said Harold, reproachfully; and the Skipper was led off like a lamb to the slaughter.

Much of this inverted order of things, of this turning the night into day and the day into night, united with the very small amount of sleep that we were able to snatch during the spare hours of the night-like day, gradually told upon the hardiest of our nerves. Towards the end of those long marches we began to "see things." A lorry looming close upon the roadside was the Scotch Express—a blazing, shrieking streak rushing through the night. The pale gleam of a lantern on the water disclosed a Roman galley—the shields, the crested helmets, the short broad sword, the rowers bending to their oars in regular rythmic order. A miniature cottage with one faint light flickering in the gloom appeared, to my tired eyes, an imperial palace, brilliantly illuminated and peopled with a glittering, mazy throng of courtiers and ladies bright. The most familiar objects, transformed by night and weariness, assumed all kinds of fantastic shapes and semblances.

Towards the end the rain ceased and the weather

mended. Before marching through Abbeville we were strictly forbidden, on account of the prevalence of spies, to answer any questions whatever about ourselves, our identity or our destination. Consequently, there was quite an electric atmosphere when a High Officer bumped into Flick in the dark and angrily and in vain demanded his name and regiment.

"I told him I didn't know," said Flick, in the plaintive tones of a lost child.

If any of the men were asked any question by anybody on the road, even if it was only to ask the time, they promptly replied, "Horatio Bottomley."

After leaving Abbeville we marched, not along the broad highway to Amiens, for that, no doubt, was already choked with blood and iron, but along the right bank of the river and in and out among the marshes of the Somme. At first the road was good. The little sparks that, like fireflies, were struck out of the flint by the iron-shod hoofs of our horses, delineated the whole length of the column. Then the road became narrower and softer, till it was nothing more than a track, along which we proceeded in single file. Heavy, sombre woods enveloped us on either side, and presently the darkness became so dense that we could scarcely see a foot in front of us. Then we skirted the edge of a broad lagoon. It was enclosed all around by black, formless masses of foliage, above which, here and there, tapered the shadowy shapes of tall, melancholy trees. The surface of the lagoon was dark and still, and glistened like polished jet. The beat of our horses' hoofs was muffled in the mud: no wild-fowl moved over the glassy waters; no sound broke the heavy silence of that gloomy solitude. Every moment one thought to see the ghostly

ferryman, it all seemed so like some mythical nether world, peopled by the spirits of the dead.

At length we came out of the black shadows of this dark Pluto's region and passed over by a bridge on to the old main road. Anon there was a long halt, and we all foregathered at the head of the Squadroon, where we reclined against the steep bank of the road and, as we were not allowed to smoke, took stiff nips of neat rum instead from Dano's well-filled flask—with the result that we soon became mildly hilarious.

The march was long and the day had fully dawned by the time that we had got our horses picketed among the trees on the swampy bank of the river at Picquiny.

Zero hour was to be at 4.20 on the following morning, August 8th. That day was fully occupied in grasping the scheme, which was then divulged to us for the first time, in marking in the contours and the various sectors on our newly issued maps, and in the innumerable inspections and routines that are necessary on the eve of every battle. Jimmie and another young officer were taken away from us as gallopers to the Corps. More officers, we feared, would be taken later on; and I was appointed a galloper between the Squadroon and R.H.Q.

Our dinner that evening was none the less cheery for the fact that in some cases it might be our last on earth. This time to-morrow night, I could not help thinking, how many of these merry young faces will be cold and rigid, tortured masks of agony?

Shortly before nine o'clock, men, leading horses, came clattering over the cobbles out of holes and corners, shanties and shelters, to their appointed rendezvous; and soon we were started on our final

approach march to the position of assembly at Longueau, just through and out beyond Amiens. That march was fraught with the keenest anxiety and suspense; and, indeed, the fate of the whole gigantic operation now hung by the slenderest of threads. During the previous night the Germans had made a raid on that very sector of our line through which to-morrow's offensive was to be launched, and had captured a sergeant and several prisoners, all Australians. After the shock of being raided, and the greater shock of being captured, prisoners often suffered from a loosening of the moral fibre. Under those painful circumstances, even stout-hearted men were apt to babble out all they knew, in a sort of hysterical hope that in this way they might save their lives—which, incidentally, were never in danger. The Huns, moreover, knew well how to take full advantage of this peculiar state of mind in the newly captured, the psychology of which they thoroughly and scientifically understood. All these prisoners knew about the offensive. The fate, not only of thousands of lives, but of one of the largest operations in the whole war, now depended on the staunchness of that handful of humble, shaken, and bewildered Australian soldiers.

Had they kept their heads shut? Had they blown the gaff? every one was asking. Anyway we should soon know. At about two o'clock we reached the western outskirts of Amiens. Slowly in the gloom we marched through the city in which, less than a year ago, we had enjoyed such cheery times. All was deserted now. Everywhere houses lay in ruins. The gay street of Les Trois Cailloux, once so bright with brilliant shops and cafés and pretty ladies, was pitted from end to end with shell-holes. Our old friend, the

Hôtel de la Concorde, where we had first revelled in the delights of civilization on our return from the line, stood piteously gaping, gutted and roofless. The dear old station, hallowed by happy memories of leave to Paris, was riddled, rickety and tottering, like a dropsical old man leaning with shaky hand upon his stick. Sad indeed was the sight of so much recent ruin. In the middle of the town, towards three o'clock, we halted, and waited and waited. We heard, with what truth I know not, that miles ahead a tank had broken down on the road and was causing this very serious block. The question, whether the prisoners had blown the gaff or not, now appealed to us with a strong personal force. If they had, the Hun guns would open with terrific intensity on Amiens, and on the roads leading out of it at any moment. The town itself, in the heart of which we were, would certainly be deluged with gas. Our usual little group stood at the head of the Squadroon, discussing these matters in all their aspects, with the slightly exaggerated hilarity that always preceded action.

"Somebody's going to get hurt to-day!" laughingly remarked an officer of the Squadron ahead who had joined our group.

He, poor fellow, was one of the first to fall. An anxious half-hour passed and then we began to move again. We breathed more freely now. If the prisoners had babbled, the enemy's defensive barrage must have fallen before this. "Stout lads," we said, "stout lads," referring appreciatively and gratefully to those true-hearted prisoners. Advance, Australia! We crawled along past the park, past the station, past the wine merchant's house in which we had been lodged after the battles of March, and out alongside

the railway to our position of assembly. As we approached it we saw all around us, through the dimness of the spreading dawn, forests of lances and vague, misty outlines of masses of Cavalry.

Now, that day it was not ours to tower in the van. We were, in fact, the last Squadron of the last Regiment of the last Brigade of the last Division to pass through the gap. Having reached our position, it was unlikely that we should move for some hours. Under the cover of a very high and sheer railway embankment, we watered, fed and off-saddled our horses, scrounged wood, lit fires, fried our bacon and boiled our tea. Just before 4.20, we all climbed up the embankment to watch the opening barrage; but, although we were so very close behind the line, we could see nothing of it, and, although I have since been told that it was more tremendous than the barrage of Cambrai, we could scarcely hear a sound. Nor did any enemy's shells fall within sight of us, and we began to think that the offensive had not come off after all. But sound is a thing of strange caprices. After about two hours we saddled up and moved on to the next ridge. There we heard news of a complete and brilliant success, news so wonderful that we scarcely dared to believe it. From that ridge we could hear sounds of battle from a village here and there, where the enemy was still desperately holding on, but we could see nothing of the fighting, which was now many miles ahead. Soon long columns of prisoners, in their grotesque, camouflaged helmets, came tramping back along the tracks. Their officers walked far ahead, haughty and disdainful, in spite of their sorry situation, and seemed to look upon their men as so much dirt. One in particular we noticed,

an elderly man of high rank and commanding presence, who strode majestically along with his hands clasped behind his back, at least fifty yards in front of the unclean and common men. Next, news arrived of our First Division; how a gap had come off at last; how they had rounded up a German leave train; how they had captured quantities of men, guns and booty. Although we ourselves were so far out of it, no words can express our delight at these glad tidings. All our training, we felt, had not been in vain.

Soon we moved on again. This time we passed along the cavalry track, along which all the British Cavalry had already passed before us, through our lines, over the chaos of no man's land, and out through the German lines into the open country beyond. This was the line, in prolongation of the line that we ourselves had helped to hold, which marked the highest tide of the German advance of March. Since then the two front lines had here been facing each other. The first thing that struck us was how sketchy the trench systems were: little shallow trenches of no solidity and with no elaborate support and reserve systems behind them. Perhaps both sides were too short of men in those days to have built up, in the time, solid fortifications; and that, no doubt, was one reason why this particular place had been chosen for our offensive. As we passed through our own front line and into no man's land, we noticed with keen satisfaction that our casualties of the day, in the small area of our own vision at any rate, had been very light indeed. Here and there a dead horse, here and there a dead man: no heaps of slaughtered horses, no swathes of fallen men. Bands of prisoners under British guards were searching about the long

grass and carrying back the wounded on stretchers. When one sees how much difficulty and how many whole men it takes to carry back a single wounded man, one marvels that the badly wounded ever survive at all. Whenever I see the golden wound stripes on civilian sleeves, I picture, long ago, four men, possibly Germans, staggering and tripping along over wire and shell-holes under the dead weight of a heavy, groaning burden.

In no man's land were gruesome relics of last March. I have, I confess, never been able to overcome a strong feeling of delicacy, akin to that of peeping at a lady at her toilet, about looking on the faces of the newly killed, unless they belonged to those whom I had known and loved. The poor empty bodies always looked, somehow, so very much at their worst, so soiled and crumpled; the poor stark faces had often that written on them which none but their own nearest should see with pitying eyes. So widely was this felt, that, wherever possible, the soldier reverently covered the face of his fallen comrade—and of his fallen foe, for death ends all small and petty things like fear and hate and war.

But those gruesome relics of March in no man's land, dried husks from which the soul long since had fled, held for me a singular fascination. Almost all had melted, as it were, until they were nearly flush with the ground: little low patches of khaki rags, bare bones with boots on the extremities, the gleam of white teeth from beneath wisps of ragged hair. Even still the attitudes of these mummies and skeletons expressed every kind of emotion. A small heap of rags and bones, and hair and teeth, cowering in a shell-hole, vividly expressed terror and despair.

Another figure, although heavy laden with kit, and now no more than skin and bone, still, in some strange way, remained in a crawling position on blackened hands and bony knees, mortally stricken, but crawling, crawling, the expression of the will to live. Another, with skeleton hands clasped resignedly behind rank red hair, was glad that so much toil and so much pain were ended. Another leaned back against a low parapet, facing the enemy, with one arm raised in scornful defiance and with the parchment skin drawn tight over features of great beauty, like a noble figure in bronze. It was like that, and at the same time, just over the little river there, that Hector had died. There they lay all around, the broken pawns of this great game, in which they had had so little stake.

There, too, lay shattered, gaping tanks and fragments of crashed aeroplanes. One burnt-out British plane lay alongside our track with, underneath it, a few charred bones. Presently we passed out of no man's land into the German lines. Here we saw how violent had been the bombardment which we had scarce been able to hear, and how effective. Singly and in groups the field-grey figures strewed the earth. It seemed that most of them had met their death in leaving their trenches and trying to flee. Just by the side of a trench in the support line, three Germans, as though suddenly surprised by the barrage and still hesitating what to do, had been stricken down by a shell. One lay on his back across the parapet and stared up at us. He was an insignificant little man with a ragged, straggling moustache. His face was cracked like a cracked egg; the lower portion of it was displaced an inch or so to one side and, as a result, his monstrous, staring eyeballs started out, bulbous

and filmy. The memory of that cracked dead face haunts me still. The Skipper, who disliked horrors, shuddered and fixed his eyes on his map; especially when we came to things that had been wounded men lying helplessly in the pathway of the Tanks.

"Every man, woman and creeping child in Europe ought to be brought here and ought to have their noses rubbed in this abomination! Then there wouldn't be any more wars," he growled.

Very slowly and with many halts we moved along, rather envious of our comrades of the Cavalry who were doing such great things ahead. Soon we passed nests of captured machine-guns, with their gunners lying dead around them; then in the copses, hollows and sunken lanes, captured field-guns; and then, further on still, great howitzers and "heavies"—guns which you may see now in London.

At about midday we made a very long halt indeed. A mile or so ahead we could see horsemen galloping up ridges, and the led-horses trotting down again; and soon there came the familiar roll of musketry and of machine-gun fire. Then we heard that, after an advance of about six miles, and after great captures in men and material, the Cavalry and the Canadians, our leading infantry, had come up against formed bodies of the enemy, and against an organized line of resistance. It is easy to be wise after events. Perhaps if our Cavalry Division, still untouched in reserve, had been hurried through at once and flung into the battle, these fresh formations of the enemy might, while shaken by the spectacle of disaster about them, have been hurled out of their new line and back to the Somme before they had had time to consolidate it.

Just before dark we watered our horses in the deep, narrow, ramificating valley of Caix. It was, of course, a mass of telephone wires and of light railway lines; a warren of dug-outs, shelters and shanties. We found it strange to occupy the shelters which only a few hours before had been occupied by an unsuspecting enemy, and which still smelled strongly of the bad sour smell of Boche. It was strange to see the piles of material and stores, the great basket-encased bottles of filtered water, the ammunition dumps, the innumerable brush-handled bombs and even chaff-cutters, all so like and yet so very different from our own. We sat down to a meal of bully in a comfortable shelter cut into the side of a cliff, elated at the success of the day in which we had taken so small a part. No shells were falling our way, but up above there was great activity in the air. In a few minutes we saw two planes fall flaming to the earth, after the little dark objects had dropped out and had fallen like stones; and we hoped and hoped that they were Boches. By this time we had run completely out of matches. Flick possessed an immense petrol lighter, which we called the flaming onion, but this, too, had betrayed us. A few yards away, reclining against a bank, lay a Canadian soldier with his hands in his pockets, his pipe in his mouth, and his tin hat tilted over his eyes.

"Ask that Canute for a match," said Dano.

Flick went over and politely asked him, but got no answer. He then shook the sleeping soldier's arm. The tin hat fell off with a clatter and knocked the pipe out of his mouth, but still he did not answer; nor would he ever answer mortal question again.

Late in the night we were suddenly moved about

a mile along the top of one of the branches of the valley to a small, thick copse, where we tied up our horses to the trees as best we could in the dark.

Long before daylight we were on the move again. This time the order of battle was reversed. We were the leading Squadron of the leading Regiment of the leading Brigade of the leading Division of the leading Corps of the leading Army of the leading Alliance in the world. Now I must try and draw a little sketch map. It may be altogether inaccurate, showing as it does how I saw the situation then, and how in memory I see it still; and, after all, this story is not about things as they really were, but only as they seemed to me. That is one of the privileges of a great author.

Our orders were to reconnoitre the wood A. Reconnaissance of woods and villages! What we didn't know about that wasn't worth knowing. We set off down the valley with the First Army, under the proud and skilful leadership of Tubes, ranging on ahead in the orthodox manner and formation. We speedily discovered bodies of our own troops on the far side of Caix, so that was all right. Now for the wood. The dawn was slowly spreading as we advanced, and a nasty splutter of machine-gun bullets kept zipping down the valley from Rosières, which caused us a few casualties. Then, swinging right-handed, we swept around and through the wood in true cavalry style. No opposition was encountered inside, but the moment a horse showed on the outer edge brisk machine-gun fire broke out from Vrely. In front was a steep, narrow valley, commanded by enemy's guns. In front of that again was the heavily wired line, running through Vrely, now

occupied by the enemy. While considering how to crack this very tough nut, we found in front of the wood A. a trench line held by the Canadians. So all our warlike movements had been a mere farce behind our own front line!

At this conjuncture the Higher Command, having ascertained that the Rosières-Vrely line was strong and strongly held, decided that the case was not one for promiscuous and isolated enterprises. Preparations were at once set on foot for a proper barrage, followed by an infantry attack, after which we were to slip through and repeat the tactics of yesterday. All this took time. We were withdrawn to a low bank at B., where we waited several hours, what time we cooked our breakfast and boiled our tea. They were, however, by no means comfortable hours. Bullets kept flicking and ricocheting over from Vrely and Rosières; and shells fell ceaselessly into the village, all around the edges of the wood and into the valley in front of us at D., the flying fragments of which hit some men and many horses.

After breakfast, the Skipper, Eiffel and I went up to C. to visit the Canadians. These same Canadians, who had been in the forefront of all the fighting the previous day, were tired, hungry and sleepless. Now, we always felt a little sore about Canadians. We had a brigade of them in our Corps, and they had been so rammed down our throats. They had no child-officers, but all grown men who had had the invaluable advantage of having gone through the ranks. At Cambrai they were the only unit of Cavalry that had passed through the gap. The last time we had been in the line we had failed to catch any prisoners and they had caught three. Their physique was so

fine, and they carried themselves and their equipment with such ease, that they felt themselves better men than the Boche, and, feeling so, they were. And in our heart of hearts many of us believed that it was the prompt and vigorous action of the Canadian Cavalry Brigade at Moreuil that had saved Amiens in March.

Now the Skipper was always intensely jealous of anybody who might be more highly considered than his own precious Squadroon. Although no one disliked bullets more than he, his jealousy overcame his prudence and he proceeded to swank in the most foolish way. In a leisurely manner we strolled out from the wood, across about fifty yards of open, to the little trench occupied by the Canadians. We saw at a glance that they had the unpleasant anxiety of having pushed on too far, and of feeling that they were left out unsupported in the air. Light crumps were falling along the trench as we reached it. The men were very wisely lying as flat as they could. The Skipper, treading delicately between the prostrate forms, strolled up to the officer in command, who asked him what he wanted. "I just came to see how you were getting on," he said. "I'm leaving a man with you, and if you're counter-attacked, or want any support, just send him back. We've got a Cavalry Division here, behind the wood."

A palpable wave of relief rippled down the whole line. When one believes oneself to be out in the air, it is good to learn that there is strong support at hand. The shells were falling fast and machine-gun bullets whipped freely over from the enemy's line about three hundred yards away across the valley. To show off still further, the Skipper and Eiffel stood

up their whole height in the shallow little trench and slowly and carefully examined the enemy's line from end to end through their glasses. Eiffel was totally devoid of nerves; for him it was easy; but though the upper part of the Skipper was cool and calm, I noticed his knees knocking together. Still standing up among the humming bullets, they put their glasses away with quiet deliberation and said good-bye to the Canadian officer.

"But you can't go back across that open bit while this strafe is on," he said. "Stay here till it cools down some, or else follow the trench along down to the valley."

"No, really, Canada, we must be pushing off, it's getting late."

And we walked slowly back through the strafe to the edge of the wood, feeling in some ridiculous way that, by taking these totally unnecessary risks, we were exalting the horn of the Squadroon. The edge of the wood was being crumped too.

"Can those blasted Canutes see us now?" asked the Skipper, when we reached it."

"N-n-no," said Eiffel.

"Come on, then!"

And we ran for shelter as we had never run before.

Things were not pleasant with the Squadroon. It was strung out along and closely hugging the low bank at B., waiting for our new attack to begin. In addition to the fragments of crumps from the shells that fell so fast in the valley, we were now and then directly saluted by salvoes of whizz-bangs. Few men were hit by these, as they lay close against the bank, holding their reins; but soon we were busy with our revolvers, putting mutilated horses out of their agony.

My own poor mare had both her forelegs shot away above the knees, and lay screaming like a child until Dano gave her the *coup de grâce*. The same shell that hit her seemed to burst right underneath my groom. He was hurled up into the air, the seat of his pants were scorched away, his skin was charred black, and he ran wildly down the valley, waving his hands above his head. Arthur Jenner caught him, but he was severely shell-shocked and was for many months in hospital. Soon the excitable Sergeant Jerry, seeing red from finishing off many wounded horses, was with difficulty restrained from despatching wounded men as well. At intervals a circus of red devils swept over our heads and fired their magazines into us. These, however, though alarming, did little damage. In the middle of one of the bursts of whizz-bang fire, William Henry walked slowly across the open from the rear to the head of the Squadroon, saluted with his usual transcendental smartness and handed the Skipper a return.

"Casualty report for signature, sir, five to twelve, sir; it has to be in by twelve."

Needless to say, routine matters of that kind are not carried out in the middle of a moving battle, and this dramatic piece of bravado highly amused us all.

For two hours we remained thus inactive under the bank, very unhappy, fast losing horses and longing to be off and doing. Flick was sent away as liaison officer between R.H.Q. and another Regiment. Bill was sent away as liaison officer between R.H.Q. and the attacking Infantry. Usually in such cases the liaison officer attaches himself to a battalion commander and transmits back the progress of the attack. Not so old Bill. "They can keep their

blinking decorations as long as they leave me my limbs," was ever his cry. But he had been told to find out exactly how the attack was going, so he would see for himself. Both his horses were shot on the way up to the battalion. Carrying a light cane, he walked over the top with the first attacking wave. When this wave had gained its objective, he went over with the second wave, and so on through five successive attacks. "I was proper thrilled," he told us afterwards, "to see the way the old Fritzes upped with their hands when we came on to them. Aha! that was grand, that was!"

Shortly after twelve o'clock our attack commenced. The Regiment mounted and moved up the valley to E. As we were mounting, a sharp burst of whizz-bang fire struck us, and all the ground was littered with a confusion of kicking and struggling and screaming horses and men. When we reached E. we stood for some time mounted while another Cavalry Brigade crushed in alongside of us. Shells came over, not very fast, and mostly burst against the bank at F. Considerable indirect machine-gun fire swept the valley from Rosières. Infantry would have suffered few casualties from the fire there; but the horseman is as a teed-up golf ball. Horses and men went down right and left. Dano rode next to me on his beloved Amy. Suddenly there was the ugly thud of a bullet; she stiffened rigid, then the blood gushed out of her mouth and nostrils and the pretty creature fell dead; and big tears filled old Dano's hardened eyes. Soon we dismounted and got close under the bank at E., waiting until news should come that there was a gap for us to gallop through. While we waited there the prisoners began to stream back from Vrely. One

little hard-faced Hun came past us, wearing the iron cross.

"By Jove," said the Skipper, "I've always wanted one of those," and he stopped him and quickly ripped it off.

The little Hun, with a sob, struck him a furious blow in the face. The Skipper staggered back and fell into a shell-hole. The men who had seen the affair instantly let go their reins and sprang at the Hun with clubbed rifles. But the Skipper was too quick for them.

"Stand back!" he said laughingly, wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth. "If any Fritz had tried to pinch your medals from you, you'd have done the same as this little cove here! Hier," he continued, giving the cross back to its owner, "metten Sie him in your gepocket, or else zome odder blighter him gepinchet vill. Scooten Sie schnell!"

And the little Hun, scowling horribly, passed along the valley towards Caix.

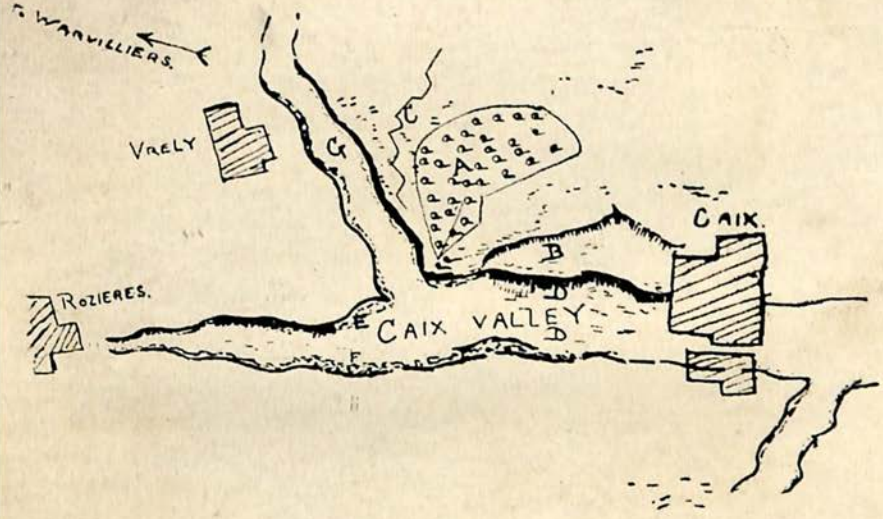
Now the Colonel was on ahead with the attacking Infantry Commander, watching for our opportunity to slip through. The R.H.Q. group was in a little trench in the valley. Squadron H.Q. was at E. waiting, waiting for orders.

"I've already lost a lot of men and nearly half my horses, and, barring prisoners, we haven't seen a blinking Boche yet," growled the Skipper.

Presently the Adjutant staggered up, helmetless and wild-looking, with a spreading stain on his breast.

"The Colonel's killed and Eddie's blown to bits—you're in command now," he said.

"All right, old boy, off you go the dressing station. Pass the word for Purple!"



To face page 270

The Skipper was just mounting to ride off up to the infantry commander when, to our immense joy, Eddie himself walked up. His face was blackened and his tin hat and breast were spattered with brains, but he was unhurt, cool and smiling. A shell had fallen into the R.H.Q. group, but he alone had been untouched.

"No, the Colonel's all right," he told us, "but altogether we've had ten officers knocked out so far; and look at Duncan there, he's got shell-shock and we can't get him to move."

We looked. Sitting on his horse in the bottom of the valley, like a graven image, he stared fixedly in front of him. Persuasion and force alike had failed to move him, and there he kept his ghastly vigil till it was ended by a shell. The killed Colonel now galloped up, very much alive. He told us the time had come for us to slip through, and rapidly explained the plan. He galloped on ahead again and Eddie led the Regiment up the valley G. and across to Warvilliers. The Squadroon was advanced guard. That ride across the open space between Vrely and Warvilliers was most interesting. Many dead Germans lay on the field; but there were more "kamarads," who sat quietly about, eating the unsuspected portion of their rations and waiting to be "cleared up." But what struck us most was the immense number of Boche tin hats all over the ground.

"They must be bad things to run in!" said Dano.

It was clear that the enemy's Rosières-Vrely line having been broken, those who had held it had either surrendered or had made all haste to escape. We swept around Warvilliers wood. The few enemy in it immediately surrendered without a blow. Our next

bound was to Ruvroy. That was a more difficult proposition. The Squadron of another Regiment, which should have covered the area on our left, had, we learned later, been destroyed by a machine-gun nest. We therefore crossed the open space between Warvilliers and Ruvroy with our left completely open. A brisk fire was kept up from that exposed flank, and a hostile howitzer battery opened on us. But quickly moving Cavalry are a difficult target, and we reached Ruvroy with few casualties. Most of the defenders had fled before we closed in; and the few that remained, like those of Warvilliers, surrendered at once. As twilight was deepening, as our right and left were now both in the air, and as there was a very strong German line just in front, our orders were to hold Ruvroy until the Infantry should come up; so there we formed outposts for the night.

The following day we were withdrawn to behind Warvilliers wood and kept there in reserve in case of hostile counter-attacks. A little beyond Ruvroy lay a very strong line, to which the enemy had been hurrying up reinforcements since the opening of our offensive, and which our Higher Command felt unable to take on without fresh troops and proper preparation. That night we bivouacked where we had waited all day. Before turning in, the Skipper insisted on every man digging himself a shelter. There was a good deal of grumbling, and Dano protested that the men were all done in and that it was unnecessary to dig shelters out there in the open, in such an inconspicuous place.

"Get on with it, blast you!" was all the satisfaction he got.

Early in the morning a bomb, one single bomb,

was dropped among us. It was of the deadly "pencil" kind, that explode on the surface and whose contents fly out flush with the ground. The air was filled with heart-rending cries and screams of maimed horses in agony. But the destroying planes were still droning overhead, and we dared not flash our torches. Fortunately it wanted only a few minutes to daylight; and when day dawned, what an unspeakable scene it unveiled: wide pools of gore, gaping gashes, raw ends of severed limbs, flowing entrails, shattered faces, piteous looks of mingled terror and reproach in those big soft eyes—and, above all, those dreadful sounds of suffering. Poor dumb faithful animals, what a one-sided friendship is that of yours with man! One man only, the line sentry, had been standing up, and he alone of the men was killed. No other man was touched. When we had done with our revolvers the only kindness that was in our power, every horse of the First Army and half those of the Second Army lay dead—thirty-seven in all.

We then marched back to the Cayeux valley until our horses could be replaced. As we rode along together at the head of the little band that remained, I saw that the Skipper, for the first time since I had known him, was depressed. His own three chargers had been killed in the Caix valley, and he rode a big, raw, totally untrained remount belonging to the 9th Lancers that Harold had caught going spare in the confusion.

"What have we got to show for it all?" he said. "A few prisoners that never meant to fight, that's all."

But we soon saw a spectacle that cheered and thrilled us through and through; especially those of us who had known the bitterness of two retreats, the

retreat from Mons, and the flight of March. For miles around, as far as the eye could reach, over hill and dale, over ridge and valley and road, the Army of England was advancing. Slowly, deliberately, inexorable as fate, they moved, those columns of ubiquitous guns, those little clumps of khaki men. After four years of material disaster upon disaster, of defeat upon defeat, we now saw before our eyes the splendid realization of British invincibility, the splendid pageant of the Empire's might marching on to victory.

"Yes, it's a good show," he said, "the best I've seen."

A little later we saw five Boche kite balloons all blazing at the same time, and the occupants of each coming down in their parachutes, all in the air together.

The weather was warm; the carcases of horses and the bodies of men lying about in the grass, blackened and swollen to loathsome shapes, poisoned all the air.

The next few days we spent in bivouac by the Cayeux valley. Tubs, Flick and two other of our officers had left us with slight wounds. Many of the men and most of the horses were no more. We realized sadly that the work of reconstructing from raw material lay before us once again. Meanwhile we lived like rabbits in little holes in the ground, occupied most of the day in burying, with our gas masks on, the bloated carcases and corpses, and in lying awake most of the night; for every night and all night through, in never-ending succession, the bombing planes came over. The woods and valleys echoed and re-echoed with the continuous thunder of the crashing bombs; the air vibrated to the ceaseless

rattle of protective automatic guns; the sky was all alive with myriads of fireflies, soaring streaks of tracer bullets, red and white. Away in the distance the great blind octopus Armeens frantically waved its hundred, groping tentacles.

Most men, who are afraid of nothing else on earth, are afraid of night bombing. I myself, when lying in my little hole, just beneath the surface of the ground, although so fearful of all other missiles, had no fear at all of bombs. Indeed, I watched with keen interest the great planes wheeling over, sometimes so low that one could almost have knocked them down with a stick. Unless a bomb hit me direct, it could not harm me in my little hole; and if it did hit me direct, well, I should not know much about it.

After some days, great numbers of remounts arrived. The following day we mounted these unhandy animals and rode away northwards to another scene of action. And so we left the scene of the deepest and most brilliant advance of the whole war, in which the Cavalry had done so much and the Squadroon had done so little.

CHAPTER XV

THE TRAVELLING CIRCUS

UNCLE JOHN, if I were to tell you the thousand and one adventures that happened to us every day, all the endless varieties of our interminable pilgrimage, all the things we thought and said and did, all the love and joy and sorrow of our wandering company, this book would never end. But I know that I have long since outwearied your patience with an over-long story, so I will now hurry it through to its close.

The battle had come to a standstill on the new Amiens front. The next British push was to be in the neighbourhood of Arras, of unhappy memory; and thitherward our old travelling circus wended its nightly way. Again we inverted the laws of light and nature, of God and man; again we spent our nights jostling on the roads, and our days in what little sleep we could snatch between times. Sometimes we rested in open fields, sometimes in châteaux, sometimes in woods, sometimes in comfortable bourgeois houses, usually in humble cottages; but always in endless diversity. Whenever we stayed more than one day in the same place, we busied ourselves with the training of our remounts, or, I should say, of our horses, as now we scarce had any other than remounts. Their

condition was so poor, and the ordinary work required of them so great, however, that we could give them only the lightest of schooling.

During the next two weeks we took a curious detached part in several battles. Although the collapse of the German army was now imminent, the German troops still fought with admirable stubbornness. Our gains in ground all along the line were only gained by the fine determination of our men, and at a heavy price in blood. Around about Arras the fighting was still over old and permanent trench systems, quite impassable for Cavalry. Sometimes our rôle was to exploit local sucesses, and in this rôle, I am bound to say, we had considerable casualties and no success. The truth is that in a fluctuating infantry battle over old trench systems there is no place for Cavalry. More often our rôle was collecting and transmitting information from scattered infantry units. An officer's patrol accompanied the H.Q. of each and instantly reported by mounted orderly every new development and every new position to the H.Q. of its Regiment, which again transmitted the information to brigade and advanced divisional H.Q. In this humble but important rôle I have heard that our services were of value. Indeed, the greatest of all difficulties in battle is the intercommunication between units. After an engagement many a battalion commander does not know the position of his own scattered companies until the *Daily Mail* with map complete arrives on the following morning. Moreover, in the technical art of writing accurate, concise and luminous reports, our young officers were very highly trained.

In most of those hard-fought battles of which I

was, as it were, a privileged spectator, it seemed to me that Tanks were the decisive factor. One action in particular I remember, close to St. Léger. Our Infantry, after a succession of resolute attacks, were held up by a copse situated astride the crest of a ridge. From where we were, nearly at right angles to the end of the ridge, we could see not only the near slope and the copse, but some of the further or reverse slope as well. We saw the khaki line dribbling forward in little rushes of sections; we heard the Boche machine-guns open up; we saw the ground dotted with still and writhing figures; we saw individual men gradually crawling forward on their bellies; then we saw that they had stopped crawling forward and that the attack was at a standstill. As ever in such case, Tanks were urgently demanded.

After what seemed an eternity we saw four Tanks waddling down the bottom of the valley. Two seemed to remain in reserve; the other two ascended the slope, one on either side of the copse, raking it with their fire, with the purpose, I suppose, of completely enveloping it. One, that on the further side of the copse from us, reached the crest before its mate. As soon as it had topped the ridge and begun to descend the reverse slope, a shell struck it full and square. It stopped, shivered and burst into flames. Clearly the enemy had an anti-tank gun, or even battery, just down the reverse slope. Then the other Tank, which had not seen its comrade's fate, reached the crest and began to descend, turning in towards the rear of the copse. Miserably impotent, unable either to warn or to stop it, we watched it meet the same sad end. Then the other two Tanks moved up from

the valley, almost in the footsteps of their ill-starred predecessors. No one nearer to them than we could have seen the destruction of the first two. As these two neared the fatal crest, all unconscious of their doom, I danced about in an agony of despair. It was so dreadful to see them going calmly, steadily on to certain destruction, and we quite powerless to avert it. No sooner had they crossed the crest than they staggered and burst into flames. Only at last, when we sorrowfully took our glasses off this heart-rending spectacle, did we notice wave upon wave of khaki figures rushing the copse. These brave Tanks had not died in vain.

One month after the date of our setting out on the Amiens offensive we were withdrawn from the line into a position of rest and readiness. I rode alongside the Skipper as we entered the little mining town of Divion. It consisted of four regular, parallel rows of red brick houses of a precisely uniform pattern, laid out by the French Government with geometrical exactitude. I believed that we had already been in every conceivable sort of billet, but this was entirely unlike anything we had ever known before. Our men had been far from the delights of civilization for a considerable time. The young men of the town were away with the colours; the inhabitants, not being farmers or the owners of their buildings, had nothing to fear from horses and appeared highly hospitable. Every other house exhibited a notice that beer was sold within. Each section, Purple told us, was billeted in a house fitted with electric light and all modern conveniences.

"I feel it coming," said the Skipper.. "The reaction! They'll throw an almighty blind—not sure

I shan't myself! Every man in a civvy bed, too—the casualties will be colossal!"

We spent several days there, attached to an Infantry Division which was waiting to attack, just south of Lens. Many and interesting were the personally conducted tours that we made over the divisional front, reconnoitring from map and eye and telescope our prospective lines of advance. And even more interesting, though less profitable, were tours over the historic fields of Notre-Dame de Lorrette and Vimy Ridge. On that former slope the war was once won in its early stages by the splendid tenacity of the French.

In those days a subtle change came over our atmosphere. We knew in our bones that the war was drawing to a close, that the dawn of peace was at hand. The Skipper, who had been reading Bacon, was seized with a passion for "fruitfulness." "Waste no precious hours," he preached. A wave of education to fit us for our return to civil life swept over the Squadroon. Our mess was inundated with floods of technical and instructive literature. We compared the rival merits of Canada and Columbia, Tasmania and Timbuctoo, East Africa and Honolulu. Classes in the various arts and crafts were formed among the men; lectures were delivered by all who had any knowledge of a trade, and by many who had none. Bill expounded the theory of farming; Spokes the art of watchmaking in a crowd. The officers who were staying on in the Army were set reading and re-reading the histories of the great captains. Some studied Jorrocks, than whom there is no sounder philosopher. Tubs devoured Brigadier Gerard. Jimmie manfully tackled Stonewall Jackson, that

wonderful work which makes clear to the dullest mind the principles and the fascination of strategy—principles which, the Skipper affirmed, could be applied with equal profit to the solving of the most ordinary problems of daily life. Dano, loudly proclaiming that all books were blinking bunkum, sat up through two whole nights reading the Memoirs of Baron de Marbot. Later on, when this education for the hereafter, or, to use the official phrase, for "post-bellum conditions," was no longer our own idea, when it became an official and compulsory and very irksome affair, we, human-like, lost all our interest in it. But at that time we had all the enthusiasm of pioneers.

Thus our days in Divion, bright, happy days, were filled with training and football, and our evenings with much talk and preparations for peace. The merry din and uproar and wrangling in our mess waxed as loud as ever; for Tubs, the magnet of all rags, had returned mended, had had his neck hardened in the old familiar way, and the other vacant places had also all been filled. Brightest, quickest, most warm-hearted and humorous of our new arrivals was Spokes, a cheerful lad who had enlisted in the first days of the war and had passed over three years out in France in the ranks. One morbid failing he had, and one only, which we tried in vain to eradicate: he had an unconquerable craving for German tobacco, and we never passed a dead Boche, or a place where there might be dead Boches, that he did not make a gruesome search to replenish his pouch; and, cognately, he made a collection of German cap badges, which was the envy of our Intelligence Department.

One morning at breakfast the Skipper read out of the local paper:

"'Yesterday at the point of day the General Rawlinson has left his trenches and many thousands of prisoners find themselves between his hands.' What ho! now we shall be on the move again!" The usual ironical laughter at the prophet in his own country greeted this oracular pronouncement. "All right," he said, "you mock yourselves of me, but nous verrons!"

Sure enough, the next night found us on the road once more.

We spent one day in the dismal desolation of Wailly, whose name sounds like what it feels. The horses, of course, stood out in the open. At midnight, on one of the wildest and windiest nights I have ever known, we got sudden orders to saddle up. How the men did it, in the rain and wind and inky darkness, when my own numbed fingers were incapable of doing up a single buckle, is still a marvel to me.

Just as day was dimly dawning, after the darkest and bitterest march that we had ever made, we reached the ruins of Inchy, a village about five miles from Cambrai, and about two miles from our old friend Bourlon wood. We were given the exclusive use of a small, bare field, without the vestige of any building, tent, cover or shelter of any kind for man or beast. First we proceeded to fix the lie of the country. Our field bordered the renowned Canal du Nord. Great iron bridges, with their girders and flanges twisted by explosion and severed through the middle, slanted down from either bank with their broken ends beneath the water. Pontoon bridges had already been constructed in their place. Two days

previously the Canadians had made their historic attack, in which they had captured, not only the canal, but Bourlon ridge on beyond, the last ridge before Cambrai, which completely dominated the town. From our bank of the canal the ground sloped gently upward. All along the slope were hastily scratched machine-gun pits, rifle-pits and innumerable shell-holes. Lying by the side of the machine-gun pits were great quantities of empty cartridge cases. Here and there in the long grass we stumbled over dead Canadians; and in the rank vegetation about the canal bank were numbers of dead Boches. We wondered how a position, seemingly so impregnable as the canal could ever have been carried, till we learned that a simultaneous attack at right angles to it had been driven in from the direction of Mœuvres. In this way the defenders of the canal bank had found themselves taken in rear as well as in front. Spokes found there ample opportunity of adding to his pouch and to his collection.

We, one brigade, were told that we might have an opportunity of breaking through and riding over those same objectives around Cambrai that we had failed to reach in the previous November. Meanwhile we must possess our souls in patience. Thereupon the Squadroon ceased from cursing the nakedness of their habitation, and forthwith set about transforming it into a comfortable dwelling-place. Dumps of material abounded in the neighbourhood. All day scrounging parties and the waggon went to and fro—at no little risk because of the intermittent shelling—between Marquion, Sains-lez-Marquion, Inchy and our field. Soon every man had a cosy, well-built dug-out, the Sergeants had a spacious mess, the horses

were partially protected from bombs, and we officers had made ourselves wonderfully comfortable. We had a bell tent in which the nine of us slept in a somewhat sardine-like manner. But our mess-room was the work of our own brains and our own hands, a work of which we were justly proud. The Skipper had inspired the movement, and had then lain down and slept while we laboured. Spokes, the fertile and inventive, Purple, the exactly mathematical, had together drawn up the plans. We carefully marked out the lines on the ground. We excavated an apartment like the dining saloon of a small lake steamer. We made a long, narrow table for the centre, between the two long seats of unexcavated earth. We boarded over these seats and the walls. We made bookshelves and cupboards. We roofed it over with three great hoops of elephant iron, which exactly fitted into each other. We boarded up the ends. A small hoop of iron at one end formed the portico, which led down by three steps into the saloon. In the boarding of the other end we fixed a plate-glass window that we had found among a pile of ruins. Over the portico proudly fluttered the Squadroon flag. The external appearance of the whole was as of a small Nissen hut three-quarters sunk beneath the earth. And because this snug little home was the work of our own hands we were happier there than we had ever been in any château.

"The war has taught fellows how easy it is to build themselves lairs," said the Skipper. "I believe when it's over you'll find all the country lanes at home will be honeycombed with dug-outs, made by brigands and highwaymen whom the war's unsettled for regular, steady work!"

Nor did our activities cease there. A full-sized football ground and a remount jumping course swiftly came into being under the respective direction of Sam'l and Jimmie. Out of the ruins of houses we pillaged caldrons in which to boil shaving water for the men and evening feeds for the horses. We collected also old water troughs and duck-boards; one dark night the waggon went forth, and in the morning certain Sappers scratched their heads over the mysterious disappearance of a huge wayside water tank. The following day there arose on the bank of the Canal du Nord a bathing house of such spaciousness and splendour as the Squadroon had never seen in any divisional area.

While we were there we heard the sounds of the many desperate battles for Cambrai. Heavy shells and bombs occasionally fell around us, but did little damage. One evening, after several days of this waiting about, the Skipper, Jimmie and I strolled over to the road and watched a Division marching up in relief. Platoon by Platoon they shuffled along, pale, feeble, immature boys, footsore and weary, staggering under the weight of their packs, and with "cannon-fodder" written all over them.

"Indeed," I remarked, "we must be at a very low ebb for men."

"And here are we strutting about with our ribbons and our spurs, and doing blink all," burst out Jimmie. "I'm going to put in for Infantry again to-morrow!"

"Yes," said the Skipper thoughtfully, "if I wasn't so afraid of guns, machine-guns, Huns, bullets, bombs, bayonets, shells, gas, mines, minnie flammen and other werfer, I'd go to Infantry myself."

And we walked silently back to our mess.

One day some of us rode up to Bourlon. From the ridge we got a wonderful view of Cambrai lying in a hollow just below. Parts of the town were burning, and all was shrouded in a thin, light smoke. Then we turned into the wood, meaning to look for the graves of our friends whom we had left behind us there in December; but no sooner had we entered the wood than it was soundly shelled, so, suddenly remembering it was our tea-time, we rode off home without delay.

Shortly afterwards news reached us of our advance from Lens. The Regiment was allotted to one of the advancing Corps, and the Squadroon was despatched with all speed to join its leading Division near Douai.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LAST LAP

AFTER two long scrambling marches, made most difficult by the huge mine craters at every cross-roads, by the broken bridges, by the appalling state of the highways, and by the resultant congestion of traffic from all these causes, we reached our Infantry Divisional H.Q., just north of Douai, late on the second night. The Divisional Staff received us with a courtesy, a kindness and an understanding that almost even disarmed Dano's inveterate hatred of all the brass-hatted band.

The G.S.O. 1, a slim young Colonel, whose face bore deep traces of many sleepless nights, explained to us the plan of battle. The enemy were falling back with all speed, but in good order, on Valenciennes. To cover this withdrawal, and to hinder our advance, they left out field batteries, machine-guns and parties of cyclists. These isolated parties, scattered over a wide front, held positions which commanded all our approaches. Our duty was to range on ahead, to locate these parties, to turn them if possible, or, failing that, to report their positions to the slower-moving force behind. In this way it was anticipated that the march of our Infantry would be relieved of all anxiety of ambush or surprise, and would therefore be far

more rapid. The G.S.O. 1 feared that, owing to our two long marches, our horses would not be in a fit state to carry out this rôle on the morrow; and suggested our not attempting it till the day after. This generosity on his part, arising from his intimate knowledge of Cavalry's special weakness, we were able, thanks to our keen horse-mastership at Inchy, to decline. The day, however, proved dull. The enemy had already withdrawn, and we reached our final objective with no opposition whatever.

That night we billeted in royal state. Food, it is true, was scarce. But the villagers, cowed and broken by their four years of subjugation, could not do too much for us. The oppressors had departed only a few hours before. Everywhere were German notices, German sign-boards, German placards, German verbotens. Everywhere were proofs of German frightfulness. Every piece of machinery, every plant of industry was destroyed. Every atom of useful metal, every head of cattle, even all the poultry, and not a few beautiful girls, had been carried away. At last, after all those hideous years, these unhappy people were free—free to say what they liked, to do what they liked, to go where they liked; and they regarded us as their deliverers. With streaming eyes they kissed our hands and embraced our knees, calling down on our heads every blessing that le Bon Dieu could bestow. They loaded us with bouquets; they garlanded our mess with flowers. They unearthed the long-buried instruments of the village band and, while we were at dinner, they marched, headed by the mayor, to and fro before our window playing "Tipperary"—which, I think, they believed was our National Anthem. At any rate it was the last that

they had heard of the retreating British in 1914. All this was extremely embarrassing for diffident young Englishmen.

"They only want a visitor from Énoch to put 'em wise," said Bill, "then they'll bung in the claims fast enough!"

"I like 'em better like that than like this," muttered Purple.

The Skipper, blushing and stammering, awkwardly thanked them in atrocious French for their kind reception of us. I am afraid we somewhat took advantage of this state of affairs in the matter of shelter and fodder for our horses. Never before had they been so splendidly stabled and so profusely found in hay and bedding. The rough but soft-hearted Squadroon, in return for this warm welcome, shared with the hungry inhabitants its own meagre rations. The one serious trouble was light. Oil and candles were as extinct as the dodo. The Germans had installed electric light, even in all the smallest villages, but they had, of course, smashed the installations on their departure. So the few ration candles that we still had with us became more precious than fine gold.

Presently we received our orders for the morrow. It was believed that the enemy's rear guards would put up a stout resistance. The young Brigadier of the leading Infantry Brigade, under whose orders we were to work, personally explained his plans to the Skipper and left entirely to him the way in which our part of the scheme was to be carried out. Four field-guns and a company of cyclists were attached to us. Half-way through dinner the Master Gunner arrived, bringing with him a bottle of port. He was an ardent and earnest young officer, who believed that

guns existed for one purpose, and for one purpose only, to shoot, to shoot, and to keep on shooting. Shortly afterwards the Cyclist Chief arrived, also an enthusiast. We soon learned that he brooded over a long-festering grievance; that he and his ilk were cruelly misunderstood, even by great High Commanders who should have known better, and that much of his time was spent in disabusing people's minds of the childish idea that cyclists were mere orderlies instead of, what they actually were, bloody-minded fighting troops. The Skipper, warmed by the generous port, gaily clapped him on the back, assured him that he perfectly understood the function of cyclists, and promised him a skinful of blood on the morrow—the while treacherously deciding to save his own horseflesh by the use of such providential orderlies. He was, indeed, highly elated at the prospect of having such an imposing little army to play with, and delighted also with the keenness of the two other young commanders.

"'Ods my little life," he cried, "we'll make a most merry din! And we'll harry and hustle and rattle and bustle, and jostle and justle these old Fritzes till they don't know their heads from their heels!"

Then we all gathered around the map. It was one vast network of tiny blue threads.

"Blast these blinking ditches!" said the Skipper. "I'd love to put up a good show for these Feet, they've done us so well. It's not going to be an easy passage, though. But we must just get over 'em somehow."

We had a front of over four miles to cover, thickly interspersed with villages, and a depth of nearly six miles to our final objective. The plan of action was

worked out with meticulous care. The troop sectors and boundaries were exactly defined, and the routes, and, as far as possible, the times of inter-communication, previously determined. It was arranged that the Third Army took the right, the Second Army the centre, the First Army the left; that the Fourth Army followed the central road in support, that the cyclists accompanied the support, and that the guns should act entirely under their own Master Gunner—who had fully entered into the spirit of our scheme, and whose views and the Skipper's were in complete accord. It was further arranged that, in order to save horseflesh, when each bound was made good, and when each village was captured, each Army Commander should fire up two white rockets; and that, if any Army was held up and needed support, it should fire up two red rockets.

This was no ordinary and orthodox advance guard over a narrow front, but an operation in which each of the three advanced Troops would be acting independently, and of which the success entirely depended on the skill and initiative of the Troop Leaders.

Overnight the Skipper made out duplicates of every message that could conceivably have to be sent, so that, when the moment arrived, he would only have to fill in the place and the hour of despatch.

We started off at the point of day. The Master Gunner and the Chief Cyclist, old Bill and I rode with the Skipper some distance ahead of the support, which halted under the command of Purple in a place devoid of any conspicuous landmark. The Armies on the right and left were soon out of sight. Presently there was brisk firing from a village in front. Then

crumps began to fall on a cross-roads about a hundred yards ahead. The Master Gunner's eyes gleamed and he quickly got busy. Set a thief to catch a thief. All through the day he seemed to know, by an uncanny instinct, exactly where the German guns were placed, and speedily silenced them. When not engaged on this counter-battery work, he kept up brisk barrages in front of our Armies, directed on places, which from the map, would naturally be held by the enemy.

The crumps soon ceased falling on the cross-roads. But the firing in front grew sharper, and through our glasses we saw the Second Army working around the village. The Master Gunner lifted on to a line behind the village. We dared not shoot at it because of the inhabitants. The Cyclist was eager to join in the fray.

"Not yet," said the Skipper, "not till he fires up his S.O.S."

Presently, far away on the right, on the line of our first bound, a white rocket soared up into the air, followed a moment later by a second. Good old Third Army! Then, a few minutes later, two more white stars of triumph floated up from far away on the left. Cheers for Tubs!

"That'll put the wind up the Boches in front!" chuckled the Skipper. "It's awful to see the enemy's signals going up on your flanks behind you—like in March, eh, Bill?"

"Ah, that's right," said Bill with conviction.

A few minutes later the firing in front died away. Through our glasses we saw the inhabitants climbing on to the roofs and waving towels and clothes, signalling to us that the Boche had gone; and a moment later two white rockets rose up from the

village. Bravo, Dano! Back went a cyclist along the road with a message to the Brigadier that the first objective was gained. The support pushed on to the village, and to its next halting-place just beyond. In the village we found Dano, faint but blasphemous from a flesh wound in the arm. Expostulating to the last, he was sent back to the dressing station, and Sam'l took up the command of the Second Army. We were again much embarrassed and impeded by the passionate gratitude of the inhabitants, who, with mysterious rapidity, had made bouquets, which the mayor formally presented to us. Tubs and Jimmie, away in their respective villages, were likewise accorded civic triumphs. Tubs told us afterwards that when the mayor had suddenly darted at him with a huge bouquet, his horse had shied violently, and he had only saved himself from falling off by ignominiously clinging around its neck. No sooner had we left our village than the Boche began to shell it, knowing quite well though he did that it was full of old men, women and children.

Throughout the day our advance from bound to bound went off like clockwork, and the reports went back with clock-like regularity. There was continual firing. Sometimes one Army was checked, sometimes another, but the guns got busy, the other Armies ranged ahead, their rockets went up behind the defenders, and these then bethought themselves and went. Only towards evening, in the last bound of all, was there any hitch. Sounds of heavy and continuous firing came from the right. On the left Tubs signalled that he had reached his goal. In front, bright and tremulous against the darkening sky, two silver stars proclaimed Sam'l the victor of St. Amand—

where, incidentally, he captured several Boches, and where he received floral tributes and a popular ovation, greater far than any of ours. But the firing still continued on the right. Time passed and the Skipper began to get anxious.

"They haven't got on yet—and they haven't sent up their S.O.S. I can't make it out," he said; "and I particularly want to keep this reserve in hand."

The Chief Cyclist looked hopeful and thought he was going to taste his promised blood at last. Just as the Skipper was mounting to ride over and see the situation for himself, the firing ceased; and, twenty minutes later, far away on the right, up soared the last two signals of success.

"Who-oop! Good old Jimmie!" he shouted. "Come on, Cyclist, come on, Purple, bring along the Army, we must hurry up and put out outposts till the Feet arrive. If the Boche puts in a counter-attack now, it'll take us all our time to hold him on that wide front."

When we rode along the line into that village on the right, we found it held by a handful of men under Sergeant Jerry. The Third Army had encountered a machine-gun nest, situated behind a broad ditch and manned by Prussians of the breed that held their honour higher than their lives. The guns were ours, but Jimmie and half the Third Army lay dead in front of that fatal ditch.

"In the last lap—my God, what cruel, cruel luck!" said the Skipper brokenly.

Those were the last shots that we fired in the war. The next day the Division to which we were attached was withdrawn from the line and we went back to rest

near Marchienne. Our Brigadier said kind things to us, our Divisional Commander wrote in kind things about us, but we turned back with a sorrow in our hearts that we had never known in any of the darkest days of the past.

CHAPTER XVII

THE GREAT RASPBERRY

ON that march back the Squadroon was led by Tubs, while we others, with the remnants of the Third Army, went to search out and bury our fallen comrades. We learned that the bodies had already been removed by the inhabitants of the nearest village. On arrival we found an imposing burial service in progress. A priest in rich vestments intoned the office of the dead. A surpliced choir chanted the requiem. Beautiful wreaths and piles of flowers strewed the coffins and the graves. All the people of the village, young and old, rich and poor, headed by the civic dignitaries in all the pathetic pomp and splendour of their official robes, were gathered there to pay homage to our men and to the boy of twenty, the veteran soldier of three tried and trusty years, who had led their liberation. When the English feel most, they are most silent. All this ostentatious ceremony jarred on us badly. After the service was over, the mayor addressed us:

"Mon capitaine, messieurs, we pray you to accept the sentiments of our most profound sympathy. Although desolated at their fate and at your deep

sorrow, we are proud that your brave comrades, who gave their lives to set us free, shall now sleep until the great reveille among our fathers and ourselves. Their beds shall ever be tended by our loving hands, watched and warded by our grateful thoughts, Their names shall be inscribed in our Book of Gold, and shall be learned by all our children. Their souls shall be prayed for daily in our church. Rest assured you leave them in good keeping, for we are proud indeed and grateful to receive our deliverers among us."

"And well you may be," said the Skipper sadly, "for you have here some of England's noblest soil."

We were billeted in the large, luxurious house of a brewer, which had lately been a high German Headquarters. On arrival we found Tubs already there, wearing an expression of mingled injury and indignation. He hastened to tell us all about it. He had halted on the roadside. He was reading a note from the Adjutant when a huge car cannoned off a mule cart and almost into him. He was so surprised that he forgot to salute the mighty helm of brass within.

"Lieutenant, do you know who is speaking to you?" boomed the Great Person.

Tubs did not know, although he might have guessed, and falteringly admitted his ignorance. The Great Person then explained who he was, how great he was, how wonderful he was; took Tubs's name and regiment and severely reprimanded him for letting his command sprawl all over the road.

"And I wasn't even on the road at all," complained Tubs. "Every horse was off it and on the grass at the side. It was simply because I didn't know who he was!"

"Serves you blinking well right," grunted Purple. "That'll learn you to smarten up your march discipline in future."

Tubs again protested against this insult added to his injury, and there for a time the matter dropped.

Towards evening Frank arrived with the daily budget. Forwarded for our information and return were the kind remarks of our Infantry Commanders in writing. Forwarded also for our information and return was a bitter and vehement screed in the own handwriting of Tubs's friend of the roadside on the subject of their morning's meeting. R.H.Q. had attached a letter, thoughtfully adding any withering words that he might have omitted.

"Gift to stuff 'em!" we chuckled, with the appreciation of true artists for a fine piece of work; for this was a private affair between gentlemen—no offence taken where no offence meant. Tubs only was upset. It is on the most conscientious that Nemesis invariably descends. But a little later orders arrived. Unfortunately that afternoon R.H.Q. had gone away to a conference, leaving the office in charge of a very young officer as yet unversed in military etiquette. In orders, publishing our shame upon the housetops, appeared a lurid précis of the Great Person's letter. Our fury knew no bounds.

"I'll, I'll blinking well *kill* the Adjutant!" spluttered Tubs.

This was, in truth, an excellent thing for us. We of the Squadroon were somewhat too smug, too self-satisfied, too certain that we were of a different and superior clay, too confident that we could do no wrong. And now it cut us to the quick to know that our shame was noised abroad; to think that other

Squadrons would mock at our discomfiture, and that callow corporals on the echelon would howl with devilish derision.

"I'm most awfully sorry, Skipper!" said Tubs at dinner, apologizing for the fiftieth time.

The Skipper, usually so sensitive to censure, made no remark. His spirit was far away in a little flower-strown garden of sleep. To love greatly is to suffer greatly. Tubs repeated his apology for the fifty-first time.

"What's that? Oh, the raspberry! If you say any more about it, Tubs, we'll have to harden your neck again!"

Slowly, absently, with one long-fingered hand, he crumpled up into a ball the five papers—the two letters of immoderate praise for a simple action dutifully carried through, the three documents of overwhelming censure for a slight laxity of discipline—and threw them into the fireplace.

Purple slowly rose from the table, picked up the ball and smoothed out the papers.

"For information *and* return," he said gravely.

Thereafter a new calendar came into use in the Squadroon. We reckoned time by so many days after the Coming of the Great Raspberry; and later on, for the sake of brevity, this era came to be called zero, and we dated our letters 0 + 5, 0 + 6, and so on.

CHAPTER XVIII

APRÈS LA GUERRE FINIT

SOME days later, after a rapid advance of many miles, we were sitting and lounging about in our mess with an unusual air of idleness and unrest. The Armistice had passed off with us without any outward signs of emotion. We had found it difficult, I think, to realize all at once how much it meant to us; we had also very little food indeed, and, what perhaps was more to the point still, absolutely no drink whatever—for drink is the greatest patriot in times of national celebration.

We were talking, of course, of the new life that lay ahead. It was wonderful to be able to talk now of life in the future with some degree of certainty, and we talked and talked of what we were going to do and be and see. About one thing we were all agreed, that first of all we were all going to take a month's holiday, going to bed when we chose, getting up when we chose, sleeping by night and living by day. And then we fell to discussing Germany, and to hoping that she would be soundly twisted for all this inconvenience she had caused us. The Skipper, usually so talkative, was strangely silent. We knew vaguely that he dreamed wild, foolish dreams of universal and perpetual peace.

"I suppose you would let the Huns into the League of Nations?" said Tubs, with a wink at us.

But this was the one subject on which he would never argue.

"Don't ask me, children," he said, with a laugh, "you know me too well to believe anything I say. Read your papers, read what the noblest minds and the finest intellects of the world, and, perhaps what is more convincing still, the hardest heads of the world, have to say on the subject; and think about it, and go on thinking about it—and some."

Ironical cheering and applause greeted this declaration.

"I'll write to *John Bull* about it!" said Spokes.

"All right, you blinking mocking birds!" said the Skipper, rather nettled, but joining in the laugh. "You, you, echoes of the savage and ignorant populace, go on talking, do! Only when I hear your childish prattle do I realize how immeasurably great I am!" (Loud and prolonged cheers.)

Then the great Leaders went to stables, leaving the Skipper and me alone in the mess.

"I suppose you're not for this Army of Occupation?" I asked.

"No, I belong to the old Army of Preoccupation."

"But are you going to stay on in the Army?"

"Stay on? No. Me for the reserve—then, if I'm wanted, I shall have to crawl out again, I suppose. But meanwhile I'll hang up my old tin hat in the hall. No more petty wars just for war's sake, for dis chile. No, I'm tired, tired, sick to death of destruction. Now that I know what it feels like to be hunted and shot at myself, I don't think I'll ever hunt a fox or shoot a bird again."

"And what are you going to do?"

"Oh, I shall be a bitter old man about the club, whispering military scandal to other bitter old men, who, when the war ended, came down from the acting rank of Field Marshal to their substantive rank of Second Lieutenant, and are praying for the next war. Can't you see us, me and some bitter old buster in a corner by the fire, with our heads close together? 'Have you heard that rotter B. has got G. 2 the Nth Division?' I shall ask. 'No! that hopeless ass?' 'Fact, I assure you!' and then in a lower voice, 'His wife and the General, you know!' and we significantly wag our heads. Then we'll have another martini, and he'll tell me how he was a dead cert. for the command of the Light Brigade, when at the last moment, by a monstrous piece of jobbery, C. got it through the influence of Ramsay Macdonald. Then we both breathe bitter hate against the War House, and all the hanky-panky and jobbery and log-rolling that therein is. Then he'll say, 'By-the-by, old boy, you know G. in the Military Secretary's Branch, don't you? They say he has a bigger say in giving appointments than Churchill himself. I—er, wonder if you would mind getting me an introduction to him?' And as years go on and on, I shall tell people more and more how it was I who won the Great Wo-ar. Oh yes, it'll be a cheery life!"

"But somehow I don't think it will be your life, Skipper," I said, smiling.

"Well, so far life has been delightfully soft and easy for me. Perhaps it's not too late to start again and play a man's part."

We were silent for some time.

"I wonder," he said, "these lads that have come

so closely into our lives—this time next year, will they still be as close, or shall we be dropping back again, each to our own spheres? If we do drop back again, then, I think, the war will have been fought in vain."

A few days later sudden orders came for my demobilization. As I waved au revoir out of the window to all the great Leaders and other friends of the Squadroon who had escorted me to the station, I somehow missed that jubilation which, for years, we had expected to feel when the war was over and we were bound at last for Blighty.

CHAPTER XIX

L'ENVOI

NOW, Uncle John, I will bore you no more. I will forbear to tell how the Squadroon rode proudly through liberated Belgium into Germany, on to Cologne, and over the Hohenzollern bridge across the Rhine; for that, as the greatest of living writers says, is another story, No, my tale is told, the book of books is done. If it is not a work of genius, it is at least, you will admit, a monument of industry. All these hundreds of pages, all these thousands of words, written by my own hand! Was there ever such a babbler before?

I write these closing lines at the Skipper's country home. In the next room, as he changes, he is singing lustily in an excruciatingly untuneful voice:

> "Whate'er befall
> I still recall
> That sun-lit mountain-side.
> . . . .
> If faithful to my trust I stay,
> No fate can fill me with dismay.
> Love holds the key
> To set me free,
> And love will find a way."

Outside the sun is shining, the trees are all in

bloom, the air is full of fragrance and of sweetness—and we have two eyes, two arms, two legs. No wonder he sings.

Through the window I can see Jackson doing wonderful things, in spite of his wooden leg, about the garden; and in a few minutes Harold will come up with my hot water. No more butler than he was soldier, but still and ever the stalwart yeoman, he will come in with a broad smile, and he will sit down on my bed and talk freely about old billets and old battles in over there. Yes, here he comes, and after long reminiscences, he says:

"Well, I must get on with polishing the Captain's boots for the Victory March on Saturday. Will you be in it, sir?"

"No, Harold, but I shall be looking on."

And so I was; and when, amid the rolling thunder of the cheering, I saw the representatives of the Squadroon in that proud procession, my heart was very full; and I thought of those others of us who, like me, were looking on, but, unlike me, with the Vision Splendid; and as the Skipper strode by with pale face and bowed head, I knew that he was thinking of them too.

Why is it, I cannot explain, that those years of horror and suffering and devilish destruction now seem the happiest period of a very happy life? Was love the key? Nor am I alone in this delusion, for there is a great, silent freemasonry abroad—the fellowship of those who have journeyed through the Valley of the Shadows. In town and village, on road and street, we know each when we pass. The man who punches our ticket on the bus, the youth who serves us in the shop, wearing on his lapel the badge

of the Regiment to which he once belonged—we know each other. No word is spoken, just a look, that's all—a look full of understanding, full of memories of those old days of once upon a time when all young men were heroes and when all Englishmen were brothers.

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